In partnership with Canada

care

CHILDCARE FORMS

IN VIETNAM RURAL ETHNIC MINORITY AREAS

RESEARCH AND PROPOSAL

This material is based upon work funded by the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada, implemented by CARE, under the Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment in Vietnam project. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Canada.

CHILDCARE FORMS

IN VIETNAM RURAL ETHNIC MINORITY AREAS

RESEARCH AND PROPOSAL

Consultant team:

1. Dr. Tran Thi Hong – Team leader
(Gender Consultant)
2. M.A. Le Thi Hoa – Team member
(Consultant on Early Childhood Education)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF CHARTS

ABBREVIATION AND ACRONYMS

MOET	**Ministry of Education and Training**
EM	**Ethnic minority**
ECE	**Early Childhood Education**
IDI	**In-depth Interview**
PDOET	**Provincial Department of Education and Training**
UCW	**Unpaid care work**
NTP-SEDEMA	**National Target Program on Socio-Economic Development in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas**
NTP-NRD	**National Target Program on New Rural Development**
UNDP	**United Nations Development Program**
UNESCO	**United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization**

INTRODUCTION

1. Background

The results of the 2019 Survey on the Socio-economic Situation of 53 Ethnic Minority Groups in Vietnam show that ethnic minority women had the "most vulnerable" structure of employment. Their proportion of employment in agriculture and forestry accounted for 76.4%, nearly six percentage points higher than that of ethnic minority men (70.5%) and twice as high as that of women nationwide (35.9%). These jobs were unstable, with poorer working conditions than in other sectors, and they were not eligible to participate in social insurance, unemployment insurance and compulsory health insurance. In addition, the percentage of ethnic minority female laborers doing "unpaid care work" was 52.0%, almost double the rate of male ethnic minority laborers at 26.6% and 2.5 times higher than that rate of female workers nationwide (19.4%).[1] On average, women spent more than one hour (62 minutes) taking care of children in a day, while men spent 33 minutes. Women with children under six years old typically spent significantly more time on childcare than those without, i.e., between 35 and 52 minutes a day.[2]

Unpaid care work, including childcare, can be a burden limiting women's participation in income-generating work. This was also confirmed by UNDP's study on gender (2012). Because of the family's unpaid care work (UCW) burden, women often temporarily quit their jobs to take care of their children,

[1] CEMA and others, 2021, Data on women and men of all ethnic minority groups in Vietnam in 2015-2019 from the results of the 2019 Survey on the Socio-economic Situation of 53 Ethnic Minority Groups in Vietnam.

[2] ActionAid and others, 2017, Unpaid care work: Redistribution for sustainable development – policy recommendation brief.

especially young kids. Therefore women's experience in the labor market is reduced. This is repeated when they give birth to other future babies, and finally, lack of work experience is a factor leading to the gender gap in employment.[3] Low income from work further promotes the gender prejudice that women should focus on unpaid domestic work rather than men.

Therefore, the question is how to reduce childcare time and create conditions for women, predominantly ethnic minority women, to participate in the labor market. In Vietnam, the government's childcare system is well developed and invested under Law No. 38/2005/QH11 on Education 2005. Accordingly, there are three types of childcare: Nurseries and childcare centers/groups for children three months old to three years old; kindergarten for children aged 3 to 6; and preschools that are ECE institutions, which combine both nurseries and kindergarten. In the past time, there have been many policies prioritizing investment in early childhood education development in ethnic minority and mountainous areas[4], such as policies on tuition fee exemption and reduction, support learning costs, investment in material infrastructure, etc. However, there are still many issues related to access, quality and level of demand satisfaction. In particular, there are no public nurseries available for children under two years old, which means that women are often responsible for taking care of those children. Or the nurseries are too far away and are not responsive to the scattered residential community. The material infrastructure of educational establishments is inadequate, with a limited number of classrooms and no playground.[5]

Within the framework of the "Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment in Vietnam" (AWEEV) project, implemented by CARE International in Vietnam and partners, funded by Global Affairs Canada in 2021-2025, the research was conducted to assess the current situation and propose appropriate options and forms of childcare to reduce the burden of unpaid care work, specifically time and efforts spent on childcare of ethnic minority women in Ha Giang and Lai Chau.

2. Objectives

This research focused on two main objectives:

(1) Study the current situation of childcare services in the project area to clarify:

- Existing local policies and programs on early childhood education;
- Availability, accessibility, and quality of each type of existing childcare by age group
- Needs for different types of childcare in the project area.

(2) Propose and consult on options to promote the enrollment of children in school to reduce childcare time (unpaid work) of ethnic minority women to choose the most suitable option(s) for the project area.

3. Research population

The research gathers the opinion of parents of children under six years of age in rural ethnic minority areas and representatives of preschools and local authorities in Ha Giang and Lai Chau.

[3] UNDP. 2012. Women's participation in leadership and management roles in Vietnam.

[4] Decree No. 86/2015/ND-CP dated 2 October 2015 stipulating the policy on tuition fee exemption and reduction, and support in learning expenses; Decree No. 116/2016/ND-CP dated 18 July 2016 stipulating policies on supporting students and secondary schools in extremely difficult communes and villages; Decree No. 57/2017/ND-CP of the Government stipulating the policy prioritizing the enrollment and educational support for preschool children, pupils and students of ethnic minority group having very small population.

[5] ActionAid and others, 2017, Unpaid care work: Redistribution for sustainable development – policy recommendation brief.

4. Approach

Rights-based approach

Human rights (or rights) are "rights that every human being is entitled to possess and enjoy, simply as a human being." Human rights are based on three pillars: Universality (we have rights as we exist as human beings); Inalienability (inviolable, non-transferable); and Indivisibility (rights are equally important and interdependent). Under this approach, programs and policies need to ensure the social security rights of ethnic minority women, including the right to access childcare services and decent work. On the other hand, children need to go to preschool and enjoy their rights to care and education.

From a scientific perspective, researchers have shown that preschool age, i.e., from 0 to 6 years old, is the "golden" period for education and lays the foundation for children's development in the future. Therefore, from birth to 6 years old, children need their physical, mental, social, and cognitive development to be invested in.

Target 4.2 in the Sustainable Development Goals also states: "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary education." Access to a good preschool program helps equip children with basic cognitive and language, and social skills, thereby helping children be ready for the primary school environment.[6] This rights-based development approach was applied to assess the legal regulations and the practical implementation measures and policies that have ensured the right to access to childcare services among ethnic communities based on the demands and abilities of children and their families.

Gender approach

The gender perspective assumes that women and men have different social functions and that ensuring two sexes have equal opportunities and conditions to perform their functions is the foundation of social justice and living effectiveness. The Gender and Development (GAD) approach seeks to transform the systems and mechanisms that create gender inequalities by focusing on women and assessing the social status of both women and men. It seeks to ensure that both women and men participate and benefit equally from development, and thus it emphasizes equality in benefits and control. In this research, the gender approach was applied to clarify the differences between women and men in terms of demand, access to childcare services, and the barriers specific to each sex. Specifically, this research clarified *the gender division of labor in housework* (who is in charge of childcare, who does income-generating work), *the right to make decisions on household chores*, including the right to decide on children's schooling and *perception of early childhood development* (the necessity of children's access to early childhood education).

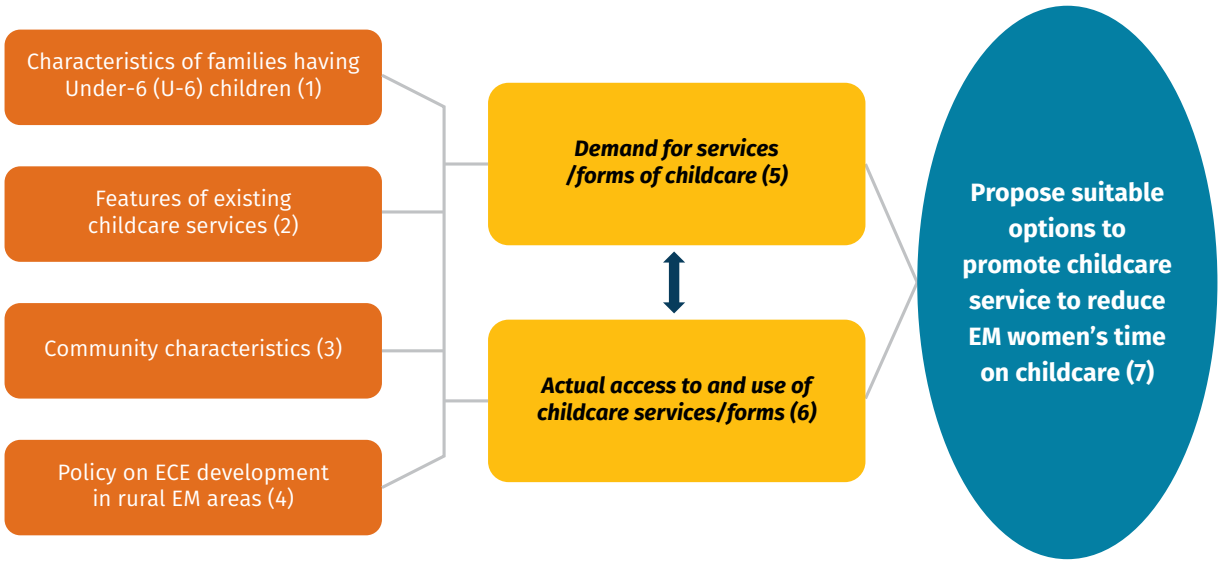
Rational Choice Theory

At the individual level, the rational choice theory stipulates that in cases where actions (or outcomes) can be evaluated on costs and benefits, a rational individual would choose the action (or outcome) that yields the best net interest, i.e., maximum benefit minus costs. This approach emphasizes that parents always consider and hesitate to find a rational solution for their situation when they choose early childhood education services to have time for income-generating work. The implication here is that it is necessary to explore the factors affecting the decision-making on access to early childhood education (ECE) services of rural ethnic minority parents in the survey areas. Specifically, in this research, the Rational Choice Theory was applied to learn about parents' choice to provide their children with access to ECE based on their consideration of sending children to schools (costs, time) and benefits (mothers' participation in work, finance, child development, etc.).

[6] Mekong Development Research Institute, 2018, Baseline Survey Report - Strengthening of Integrated Early Childhood Development 2017-2021 of UNICEF Vietnam

5. Analytical framework

Based on the theory and practice of educational development, an analytical framework was developed to provide specific criteria to measure the status of access to and use of childcare services and the demand for appropriate services of community members; factors affecting that actual use and demand.



6. Research methodology

Quantitative and qualitative research was carried out together to collect information, with the following specific data collection methods:

Desk review

Review documents and policies on ECE development at the national and provincial levels (Ha Giang and Lai Chau).

Review documents related to developing effective childcare models in ethnic minority areas to learn from their experiences to inform recommendations on appropriate childcare models for ethnic minority rural areas in Ha Giang and Lai Chau.

Statistics on childcare and education services in the research area

This method was implemented to identify the current status of forms of childcare and education in each commune in the project area. Statistics on childcare and education services were conducted with the following disaggregation:

- Types of care-education: Public preschools, public school branches, private preschools; independent private childcare centers - kindergartens)
- Care-education conditions: number of teachers per centre, classes, professional qualifications of teachers, material infrastructure (classrooms, playgrounds, toys, etc.)

Questionnaire interview

Interviews were conducted with 537 representatives from households having U-6 children (including those using local childcare and education services or not) in nine communes/towns.

To ensure the voices of both women and men in the research sample, 50% of the respondents were female, and 50% were male. Detailed information about the demographic and social characteristics of the research sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of questionnaire survey respondents

	Rate (%)	No.
Sex		
Male	41.7	224
Female	58.3	313
Educational level		
Primary School or lower	25.9	139
Lower Secondary School	37.6	202
Upper Secondary School	36.5	196
Ethnicity		
Dao	21.6	116
Kinh	13.0	70
Tay	22.0	118
Thai	15.8	85
Pa Then	9.1	49
Mong	6.3	34
Others	12.1	44

In-depth interview

Based on information about ECE institutions in the project areas, qualitative interviews were conducted in 6 communes/towns, including Yen Binh, Tan Trinh and Tien Nguyen communes (Ha Giang province) and Ban Bo, Then Sin communes (Lai Chau province). Selection criteria were the child enrolment rate and education facilities (schools meeting national standards, number of schools/school branches/ school sites, number of multi-age classes).

Specifically, in Ha Giang, the town was selected because of the specific nature of the area (urban area). Tan Trinh commune had a shallow enrolment rate of children aged 6-36 months (40.5%), while the enrolment rate of children aged 36-59 months was 95% (the only commune that did not reach 100%). The commune had few preschools and school branches meeting national standards (four schools/school branches) and a low number of multi-age classes (four classes).

Tien Nguyen commune had a higher enrolment rate of children aged 6-36 months in the locality (61.2%), and the enrolment rate of children aged 36-59 months was 100%. There was no national standard kindergarten. There were many school branches (12 branches) and many multi-age classes. In Ban Bo commune (Lai Chau province), the enrolment rate of children aged 36-59 months was low (18.4%). There was no national standard kindergarten; schools have many school branches (12 branches) and multi-age classes (8 classes). In Then Sin commune, the enrolment rate of children aged 6-36 months was higher (35.0%). There was a national standard kindergarten. There were many preschool branches (5 branches) and many multi-age classes (7 classes).

Table 2: In-depth interview sample size

IDI participants	Ha Giang	Lai Chau	Total
IDI – representatives of the provincial department of education and training in charge of ECE	1	1	2
IDI – representatives of the district department of education and training	1	1	2
IDI - communal government authorities	3	2	5
IDI – teachers/nurses of the childcare-education institutions, incl. public and private (if any): Teacher of one institution/ commune	3	2	5
IDI – parents of U-6 children, including those using childcare-education services or not: 2 parents/commune	6	4	10
Total	14	10	24

7. Limits of the research

Due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the quantitative survey was conducted to collect information through direct interviews by a team of enumerators/collaborators in the area. The qualitative survey interviews were conducted online by the consultant team. Limits in the interaction during the interview process and the interrupted transmission partly affected the effectiveness of information collection. On the other hand, the lack of on-site observation also reduced the effectiveness of the assessment on the availability and accessibility of childcare and education services in the community.

In order to address these issues, in IDIs, once the collected information was unclear, the consultants would ask the respondents for another quick talk to confirm or get more insights. Besides, the consultants also asked teachers and parents of U-6 children to take pictures of material infrastructure, educational activities at main schools and branches, and roads to school. Therefore, the consultants could better understand the availability and accessibility of childcare and education services in the community.

PART 1: CURRENT STATUS OF CHILDCARE SERVICES IN RURAL ETHNIC MINORITY AREAS

1.1. Current status of access to and use of childcare services

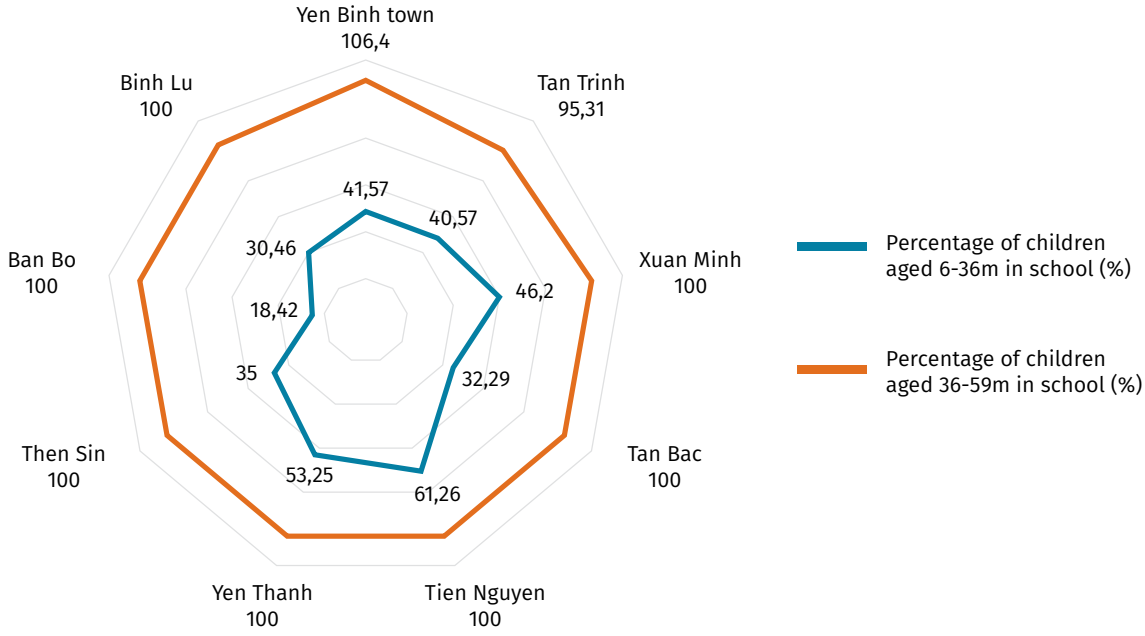
Statistics of preschools show that the enrolment rate of children aged 36-59 months is almost 100% in most communes. The enrolment rate of 5-year-old children is also 100%. This is thanks to the policy of ECE universalization (for 5-year-old children) in the period 2010-2015, as well as the policies prioritizing investment in early childhood education development in ethnic minority and mountainous areas, such as policies on tuition fee exemption and reduction, on support in learning costs, investment in material infrastructure, etc... Specifically, regarding the policy on tuition fee exemption and reduction, 5-year-old kindergarten children in areas with extremely difficult socio-economic conditions, extremely difficult communes in coastal areas and islands are exempted from tuition fees.[7] Kindergarten children who are ethnic minorities in areas with extremely difficult socio-economic conditions are entitled to a tuition fee reduction of 70%.[8] 3 to 5-year-old kindergarten children learning at ECE institutions in border communes, high mountains, islands and communes with extremely difficult socio-economic conditions are supported with the amount equivalent to 10% of the base salary for nine months in a school year to maintain school lunches.[9]

[7] Decree No. 86/2015/ND-CP dated 2 October 2015 of the Government stipulating the mechanism for collection and management of tuition fees for educational institutions under the national education system and the policy on tuition fee exemption and reduction, and support for learning expenses from the 2015-2016 schoolyear to the 2020-2021 schoolyear; and the Government's Decree No. 145/2018/ND-CP dated 16 October 2018 amending and supplementing a number of articles of the Decree Decree No. 86/2015/ND-CP

[8] Decree No. 86/2015/ND-CP dated 2 October 2015 of the Government

[9] Decree No. 06/2018/ND-CP dated 9 May 2018 of the Government stipulating the lunch support policy for kindergarten children and the policy on benefits for preschool teachers

Chart 1: Enrolment rate by age in project communes



Source: Statistic data of preschools

In Lai Chau and Ha Giang, the school enrolment of 3-year-old and older children was planned with specific targets for each stage. Lai Chau has set the enrolment rate target in 2021-2025 of over 98%.[10] Ha Giang has set a target that by 2025, over 95% of children completing the ECE program will be fluent in Vietnamese, and the enrolment rate of around 99.5% of 5-year-old children.[11]

The measures to accomplish these targets include: effectively implementing the regimes and policies of the Central Government in the locality, studying and promulgating policies on investment and development of ECE centers/groups, classes, private schools where conditions permit; continue to strengthen Vietnamese skills for preschool children in ethnic minority areas. In addition, local authorities have played an important role in communicating and mobilizing parents to send their children to school. Every commune has established a Steering Committee for Universal Education or a mobilization committee on child enrolment, developed an advocacy plan and issued a public regulation for people to send children to school.

> *Establish a steering committee for universal education of the commune. Develop programs and plans to propagate and mobilize people, go to their homes to propagate and mobilize people to send their children to preschool at the appropriate age. Develop public regulations on a commitment to sending children to schools. People in the village need to comply with the regulations; if not, they are not entitled to the supportive policies*
>
> IDI – Leader of Then Sin commune, Lai Chau

[10] Plan No. 1261/KH – UBND of Lai Chau province dated 05 July 2019 on the "Implementation of Early Childhood Education Development Scheme 2018-2025 in Lai Chau province".

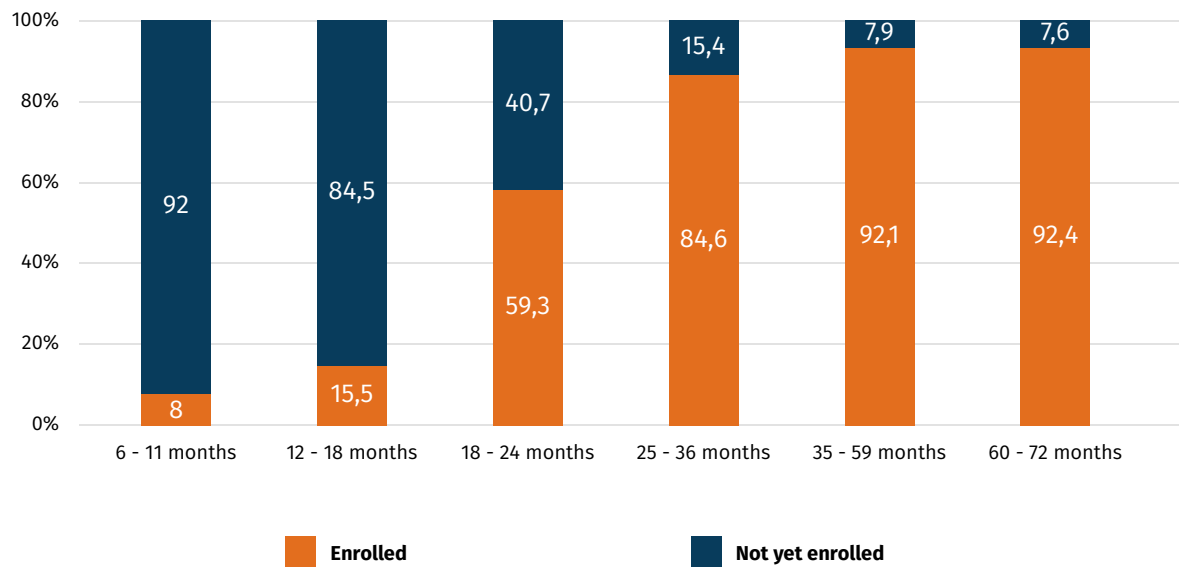
[11] Resolution No. 06-NQ-TU of the Ha Giang provincial Party Committee on education and training development in Ha Giang province.

> *"The commune has a steering committee to review households sending children to school. We have a mobilization committee on child enrolment; the commune leader is the head of the committee, and representatives of departments, mass organizations, and schools are members. Inform the village heads on the time of child administration, inform the households to encourage them to send their children to school, and limit the cases of children staying at home except in special circumstances. There are cases where the children dropped out of preschool at the age of 4-5, the mobilization committee knew the information and came to their houses to mobilize, unless due to very far distance (many houses are on hills, on the other side of the rivers, streams) or economic conditions which could not be solved"*
>
> IDI - Representative of commune leaders, Tan Trinh commune, Ha Giang

The percentage of children aged 6 to under 36 months accessing ECE differs significantly in communes, with the enrolment rate in Ha Giang being higher than in Lai Chau. The reasons explaining the lower enrolment rate of the under-36-month-old than the over 36-month-old children group and the differences in communes will be presented in detail in the latter part of this Report. However, in general, this situation reflects that Vietnam's strategy for ECE universalization in recent years has been focusing more on the group of kindergarten-age children (than the group of nursery children).

The child enrolment rate tends to be directly proportional to their age group. Most children go to preschool at the age of 18 months or older. And there remains a gap between the group of 18-24 months, the group of 25-36 months, and the group of over 36 months. Specifically, 40.7% of children aged 18-24 months have not yet been enrolled, while this rate in the group of 25-36 months old is 15.4%, and in the group of over 36 months is more than 7%.

Chart 2: Child enrolment status, by age group (%)



Source: Survey data, 2021

1.2. Factors affecting the access to childcare services

1.2.1 Family-related factor

There is no significant impact of the household economic factor on child enrolment. The percentages of children currently in preschool in poor, near-poor and better-off households are 75.3%, 78.5% and 72.5%, respectively. The policy on tuition fee and lunch support for children in areas with difficult socio-economic conditions has probably cleared the gap between households having different living standards regarding their children's school attendance (details on the policy will be presented later).

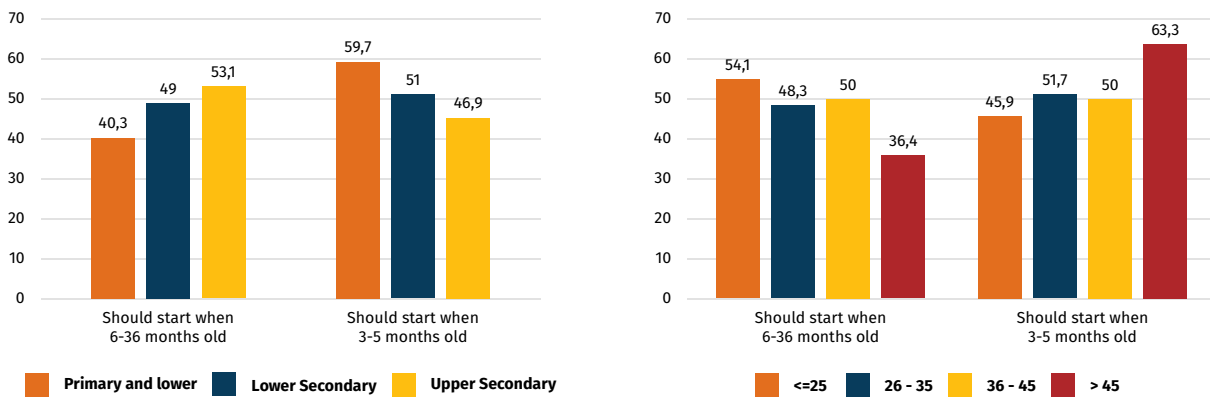
There is no significant difference in the percentage of children who have been/not enrolled in schools by gender (76.9% of boys and 71.7% of girls are currently attending school). **It shows no discrimination between boys and girls in accessing ECE.**

> *Now, here, parents' awareness is pretty good. No male preference, boys or girls are the same (equal). Every family wants their children to go to preschool at an appropriate age to access society. No discrimination at all*
>
> IDI, a father of a 3-year-old child, not in school, Tan Trinh commune, Ha Giang

Sending children to preschool depends on the family's views/awareness of the necessity and appropriate age for children to go to school. More than 50% of surveyed household representatives said that children should be enrolled at three years or older. The viewpoint supporting child enrolment at the age of three and older could be one factor that keeps the enrolment rate of children under 36 months old low.

There is no difference between male or female respondents and respondents of different ethnic groups. However, in terms of age and education level, more respondents with higher education levels or younger ages tend to think that children should go to preschool at the age of 6-36 months.

Chart 3: Views on the appropriate age for children to start pre-school, by education level and age of respondents (%)



Source: Survey data, 2021

Sending 6-36-month-old children to preschool has a crucial meaning in promoting children's physical, psychological, thinking, cognitive and intellectual development. According to UNESCO, early childhood, defined as the period from birth to eight years old, is a time of remarkable growth with brain development at its peak. During this stage, early childhood care and education (ECCE) is more than preparation for primary school. It aims at the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing. UNESCO's approach is reinforced in the Education 2030 agenda and target 4.2 of Sustainable Development Goal 4. In particular, it aims to "by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education".

The qualitative information obtained indicates that some parents support enrolment before the age of three as they believe that it could benefit the child's development and help reduce the care time of family members, especially mothers. Meanwhile, some parents believed that children should start preschool at three or older because they were worried about their children's health and adaptability.[12]

Reasons for supporting early enrolment	Reasons against early enrolment
"24-36 [months] is appropriate; only at that age can children be aware. If they start learning at an older age, it will be difficult for children to contact [socialize]—[There is a] trend of sending children to preschool early to get into contact early. When sending children to preschool early, the mothers at home can do many tasks because if the children stay at home, the mothers have to look after them. If teachers take care of the children, household economy is more developed" (IDI, father of a 5-year-old child, main school, Dao, Tien Nguyen, Ha Giang) *"It is okay for children to start at the age of 10-15 months as it is good for them to go to preschool early. Children who go to preschool early can go out [socialize], early communication is better for children than staying at home with their parents" (IDI, mother of a 2.5-year-old child, main school, Kinh, Then Sin, Lai Chau)* *"[When we] bring children to school, they can socialize with friends, teachers and learn many things. Besides, there are more toys at preschool than at home. The teachers teach a lot of songs in alphabet letters. In general, it's better to go to school, and children are less fussy/sniveling with their parents. Sending children to preschool helps reduce the burden on mothers. Normally [when a child is] at home, the mother, is mostly in charge of taking care of the children, and grandma supports. Men work a lot and do heavy work, so they don't have much time to care for their children" (IDI, father of a 3-year-old child not in preschool, Tan Trinh, Ha Giang).*	*"Some parents have not had correct understanding, they are afraid that their children are too young then they would cry in class" (IDI, father of a 5-year-old child, main school, Dao, Tien Nguyen, Ha Giang)* *"I don't want to send my children to preschool early as my child often cries and gets sick the whole week when being sent to school" (IDI, mother of a 2.5-year-old son, main school, Kinh, Then Sin, Lai Chau)*

[12] https://en.unesco.org/themes/early-childhood-care-and-education

When asked about the reason for not sending their children to school, most parents chose the option that their children were too young to send to preschool (90.8%). However, regarding the age group of children who have not attended school, 16.6% are 37-72 months, and 11.7% are 25-36 months old. This data suggests that the reason saying children are too young to go to preschool may be an explanation for other underlying causes.

There are differences in parents' viewpoints on the age for children to start preschool in each commune. In Lai Chau, parents in Binh Lu tended to be more supportive of sending their children to preschool early than parents in Ban Bo and Then Sin. In Ha Giang, parents in Tien Nguyen, Xuan Minh, and Yen Thanh commune shared the same tendency as their counterparts in Binh Lu and were more supportive than parents in the other communes. These areas have higher percentages of child enrolment than in other locations. This shows the concordance between the viewpoints and behaviours of the parents.

Factors affecting the different perceptions of parents in different communes have not been clearly identified. In Lai Chau, the difference in the education level of respondents in each location could be an influencing factor. The proportion of respondents reaching upper secondary school or higher education and supporting early preschooling in Binh Lu is higher than such rate in Ban Bo and Then Sin. However, the survey data have not shown the correlation between the percentage of respondents acquiring higher education levels and the percentage of respondents favoring children going to preschool early in Ha Giang. Other factors were explored, such as topographic, enrolment age in each area, etc. Still, they were not convincing enough to confirm their influence on the difference in parents' perception of the preschool age of children.

Table 3: Perception of the suitable preschool age of children, by commune (%)

	Lai Chau			Ha Giang					
	Ban Bo	Binh Lu	Then Sin	Tan Bac	Tan Trinh	Tien Nguyen	Xuan Minh	Yen Binh Town	Yen Thanh
6-36 months	46,6	**56,5**	48,5	51,7	39,2	**54,5**	**52,6**	35,4	**61,7**
Over 36 months	53,4	43,5	51,5	48,3	60,8	45,5	47,4	64,6	38,3

Source: Survey data, 2021

1.2.2 School-related factor

1.2.2.1 Availability

Public educational institutions are common in the two districts of Quang Binh (Ha Giang) and Tam Duong (Lai Chau). Currently, In the Tam Duong district, there are 13 preschools, one independent private childcare center (IPCCC) named Son Ca, and 192 groups/classes with 4,592 children. In the Quang Binh district, there used to be two IPCCCs that were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic impact. There are 16 public preschools; 80 school branches with 252 classes/groups, enrolling 5,376 children.

In each commune, the main school is located in the commune center area, and school branches are established in the villages to meet the childcare demand of households. In general, children in Quang Binh and Tam Duong do not have many public and private childcare services options. In nine communes in the project area, children attend public preschools and school branches.

The question is about the extent to which the benefits of the public ECE institutions meet the childcare needs of local households. The information obtained shows that there are many issues related to the availability of services offered by these preschools that may limit children's access to preschools.

Lack of school branches

All communes have developed school branches so that children from different villages can access care and education when the distance from their villages to the main schools is far and when the roads are not convenient. However, there are still villages having no school branch and where access to school branches in other villages remain challenging due to topographical condition.

> *In Tan Trinh commune (Quang Binh, Ha Giang), there are ten villages, with four school branches to receive children. Each school branch has a child-care group for 24-36-month-old children and seven kindergarten classes. Currently, two villages (Tan Tien, Tan Bang) are being isolated by the river, there is no bridge, so it isn't easy to arrange for the children to go to school. Tan Bang is offering multi-age classes in the Ngoi Hang village school branch. The possibility of opening a school branch in Tan Tien village is low due to the small number of children. The commune proposed to build a bridge to facilitate transportation, i.e., the suspension bridge project with an estimated amount of VND3 billion, but funding has not been mobilized sufficiently*
>
> (IDI, leader of Tan Trinh commune, Ha Giang

As a result, although the families wish to send them to preschool, some children of preschool age in Tan Trinh are still at home and cared for by the local women.

> 
>
> *The nursery institution is on the other side of the river. It takes lots of time, i.e., the whole half a day, and one person, to take the child to /from school. The road is in bad conditions, in high water season, we must travel by boat, which is very inconvenient. We want to send our child to kindergarten to prepare for the 5-year-old preschool class later, but we cannot because of difficult road conditions. Parents in the village all desire to send their children to school, which is about 1km away from our houses, but the problematic transportation condition with the river makes it inconvenient. The main preschool is over 2km from our location, also on the other side of the river. There is a temporary bridge across the river, but the bridge will be flooded away in the rainy season. The most challenging barrier is still the poor road condition.*
>
> *Regarding finance, we pay according to the preschool regulations – my family does not find it difficult and does not have any questions about finance. The mother is still the main child caregiver in the family. This affects the mother's working process, which takes a certain amount of time. Mom takes care of her child; when she goes to work (on the fields), she sends the child to grandma for help*
>
> IDI, a father of a 3-year-old child not in preschool, Tan Trinh, Ha Giang

Lack of age-appropriate groups/classes for children - the common practice of multi-age groups

According to Circular No., 52/2020/TT-BGDDT dated 31 December 2020 promulgating the preschool charter, children are organized in childcare groups or kindergarten classes with a maximum number of 15 to 25 children per group/class. There are classes for 3-12 months old, 13-24 months old and 25-36 months old children. Children aged 3 to 6 are organized into kindergarten classes; the maximum number of children in a kindergarten class is regulated to be 25-35, according to their age groups: 3-4 years old, 4-5 years old and 5-6 years old.

When the number of children in each childcare group is lower than 50% of the maximum number of children specified at Points a and b, Clause 1 of this Article, they shall be organized into multi-age childcare groups. For a multi-age childcare group, they can enroll up to 20 children, while the maximum number of children for a kindergarten class is 30.

It can be seen from Table 3 that the practice of multi-age classes takes place in all communes. The reason for multi-age classes is the sparsely distributed population. The percentage/number of children in each village is not enough to establish age-appropriate classes, so multi-age classes are a temporary solution to overcome this situation.

Notably, in three communes of Lai Chau, there are also mixed classes for both kindergarten age and nursery age children at the same time. Mixing children of these two age groups could lead to limitations in children's development due to the significant difference in cognition and the age of each group.

The teachers also said that teaching mixed classes of children at 2 or 3 different ages was very hard. Selecting the right content and requirements for each age group in the same activity is also challenging. That is also why parents do not want to send their children to preschool if they have to join multi-age classes. Parents are concerned that the education in such multi-age classes may drive the teachers to care about older children, agile and active children, and pay less attention to younger, shy children who have limited communication skills in Vietnamese.

Table 4: Number of schools/school branches and classes in the communes

No.	Preschools	School branches	Nursery groups/ centers	Kinder-garten classes	Multi-age classes	Rate of multi-age classes
Quang Binh	Sao Mai (Yen Binh town)	04	03	06	02 multi-age classes of nurseries (18 – 36 months) 04 multi-age classes of kindergartens (3 – 5 years)	6/15
	Tân Bắc	03	05	10	01 multi-age classes of nurseries 18 – 36 months 02 multi-age classes of kindergartens (3 – 5 years)	3/18
	Tân Trịnh	04	06	7	04 multi-age classes of kindergartens	4/17
	Tiên Nguyên	12	0	3	12 multi-age classes of kindergartens 02 multi-age groups of nurseries (18 – 36 months)	14/17
	Xuân Minh	04	02	03	05 multi-age classes of kindergartens (3 – 5 years) 02 multi-age groups of nurseries (18 – 36 months)	7/12
	Yên Thành	04	05	05	04 multi-age groups of nurseries	4/14
Tam Duong	Bản Bo	12	02	09	08 multi-age classes (2 – 5 years)	8/19
	Thèn Sin	5	02	06	03 multi-age classes (2 – 5 years)	3/11
	Bình Lư	5	02	05	07 multi-age classes (2 – 5 years)	7/14

Source: Statistics data and in-depth interviews with childcare institutions in 9 communes

On the other hand, there is a shortage of teachers in both Ha Giang and Lai Chau. Following the Lai Chau PDOET, by 2020, there was a shortage of 400 teachers due to the lack of permanent positions allowed for recruitment. The current regulated way to calculate the number of teachers allowed has limited the number of teachers. Joint Circular No. 06 on the regime of the number of teachers regulates the number of teachers based on the number of children (students), while the number of children in each school branch is less than the required one as per the regime.

In addition, according to information from the Tam Duong District Education Department, many teachers were on maternity leave, resulting in the local shortage of teachers to care for children. In Ha Giang, the PDOET also reported a shortage of several hundred teachers. The recruitment of teachers is difficult due to the lack of applicants. According to a survey in 3 communes in Quang Binh district, Ha Giang province,

there are only 1.5 teachers per class, i.e., 0.5 teachers lower than the required number. In many school branches, there is only one teacher per class. This leads to the fact that the schools cannot divide the classes or groups to serve children of the same ages. Consequently, they can't mobilize more nursery-age children to school, especially those aged 12-24 months. At the same time, this leads to cases where teachers are overloaded. According to regulations, they only work for eight hours per day, but teachers have to be on duty throughout noontime, making their working shift often last 10-12 hours/day in total.

Lack of semi-boarding services due to the lack of kitchen or inconvenience of transporting lunches/ meals from the main preschools to the school branches

In all communes, kitchens are only available at main schools and a few branches. In Lai Chau, thanks to the convenience of transportation, children's meals are transported from the main schools to the school branches. In Ha Giang, only the school branches, not too far away from the main schools and convenient for transportation from the main preschool, are receiving lunches from the main schools to serve semi-boarding children. Currently, 16/33 school branches in the project communes in Quang Binh, Ha Giang, have not yet provided lunches in class.

Table 5: Current status of the provision of lunches and semi-boarding services at main schools and school branches

Province	School	School branch	Semi-boarding services			
			Kitchen	No kitchen, Lunch provided by the main school	Children bring their lunch	No lunch in class
Ha Giang	**Yen Binh Town**	Sao Mai Preschool	x			
		Na Rai				x
		Tan Binh				x
		Tan An		x		
		Tan Tien				x
		Yen Binh Preschool	x			
		Thuong Son				x
		Ha Son				x
	Tan Bac Preschool	Main preschool	x			
		My Bac		x		
		Nam Kham				x
		Na Tho		x		

Table 5: Current status of the provision of lunches and semi-boarding services at main schools and school branches

Province	School	School branch	Semi-boarding services			
			Kitchen	No kitchen, Lunch provided by the main school	Children bring their lunch	No lunch in class
	Tan Trinh Preschool	Main preschool	x			
		Mac Thuong				x
		Mac Ha				x
		Tan Trang		x		
		Ngoi Han				x
	Tien Nguyen Preschool	Main Preschool	x			
		Xuan Hong			x	
		Xuan Hoa			x	
		Tay Son			x	
		Cao Son			x	
		Nam Cai			x	
		Trung Thanh			x	
		Hong Son			x	
		Quang Son			x	
		Thuong Binh	x			
		Ha Binh			x	
		Thuong Minh			x	
		Xuan Chieu			x	
	Xuan Minh	Main Preschool	x			
		Phin Trai				x
		Bac Peng				x
		Lang Cang				x
		Lung Ly				x

Table 5: Current status of the provision of lunches and semi-boarding services at main schools and school branches

Province	School	School branch	Semi-boarding services			
			Kitchen	No kitchen, Lunch provided by the main school	Children bring their lunch	No lunch in class
	Yen Thanh	Main Preschool	x			
		Dong Tam	x			
		Yen Thanh				x
		Thuong Binh				x
		Tan Thuong				x
Lai Chau	**Ban Bo**	Main Preschool	x			
		Trung Tam		x		
		Hop Nhat		x		
		Na Khuy		x		
		Phieng Pang		x		
		Phieng Tien		x		
		Na Can		x		
		Na Khuong		x		
		Phieng Hoi		x		
		Na Ut		x		
		Nam Tang		x		
		Coc Phung		x		
		Co Lot		x		
	Then Sin	Main Preschool	x			
		Sin Cau	x			
		Pan Kheo	x			
		Then Sin		x		
		Na Dong		x		
		Dong Phong		x		

Table 5: Current status of the provision of lunches and semi-boarding services at main schools and school branches

Province	School	School branch	Semi-boarding services			
			Kitchen	No kitchen, Lunch provided by the main school	Children bring their lunch	No lunch in class
	Binh Lu	Main Preschool	x			
		Na Don		x		
		PaPe		x		
		Na San		x		
		Na Hum		x		
		Na Phat		x		

Lunch in Main Preschool, Then Sin, Lai Chau

According to the schools' self-assessment, although there are kitchens at the main schools, most of the kitchens have not met the principle of the one-way kitchen. Article 6 of the Circular No. 13/2020/TT-BGDDT promulgates regulations on the standards of material infrastructure applicable to preschools, primary schools, lower and upper secondary schools with many levels of education, states that: the kitchen is independent of other functional room blocks; it includes preliminary processing area, processing area, cooking area, food dividing area; it is designed and organized using a one-way operation chain. Following this, activities in the kitchen are organised in a one-way direction, from the ingredient preparation to the preliminary processing, cooking, serving, and cleaning. In addition, the degradation after long use since construction is also recorded at the Binh Lu main preschool (Lai Chau).

Kitchen in Nam Cai branch, Tien Nguyen, Ha Giang

In school branches, the kitchens usually don't comply with the one-way principle and often do not meet material infrastructure and equipment requirements. Some kitchens have been renovated from the warehouses (e.g., kitchens at Sin Cau and Pan Kheo schools of Then Sin, Lai Chau).

The lack of kitchens in most school branches is due to the lack of material infrastructure, funding and resources. In Ha Giang, school borrowing locations (schools that do not have their own classrooms) remain common. The two provinces' education sector and local authorities cannot arrange enough budget to construct new schools/school branches and kitchens. In Lai Chau, thanks to the National Target Program on New Rural Development (NTP-NRD), the schools/school branches were spaciously built, but there have not been enough resources to build kitchens.

Having no kitchens and no lunches transported from the main schools, many school branches in Ha Giang do not offer semi-boarding services. For example, in Tan Trinh, out of four school branches, only Tan Trang can receive lunches from the main preschool, thanks to its closest distance (4km from the main school). Two out of four school branches in Yen Binh town offer semi-boarding services. In Tien Nguyen, there are only two out of 11 school branches, i.e., Thuong Binh and Xuan Hoa, offering semi-boarding services for children.

In Lai Chau, thanks to the NTP-NRD, the roads from the main schools to the school branches are better and more convenient. The transportation of food from the main schools to the school branches helps the school branches perform the semi-boarding services despite having no kitchen.

> *The preschool wants to offer lunch for the children at preschool, but we cannot due to the lack of funds to build a kitchen or to hire a cook*
>
> IDI, Representative of the preschool, Tan Trinh, Ha Giang

> *The lunch is offered at main schools in the town center, not at school branches because of the very low number of children, a limited number of teachers, no kitchens, therefore, no lunches could be served*
>
> IDI, Leader of Yen Binh town, Ha Giang

Another reason leading to the failure of the semi-boarding services is the complex economic condition of the households. For example, in Yen Binh town, two schools have not provided semi-boarding services because the parents in the two villages are in difficult economic circumstances and cannot afford meal contributions. The food contribution amount is VND14,000/meal/child/day (agreed with parents in a meeting at the beginning of the school year). In school branches, school-parents meetings are also held to discuss the preparation of meals for semi-boarding children, but parents could not afford it. In addition, these two school branches are also located in a place convenient for travelling, so the parents choose to pick up and drop off their children four times/day.

For remote households, because it takes much time to travel back and forth, many parents hesitate to send their children to school if there is no semi-boarding service.

> *The school branch is in another village, the teachers are also dedicated, but the school does not provide lunches for children, we have to pick them up at noon. Teachers also return home at noon because the school does not have a break room for teachers. If needed, parents may prepare food for their children, but it is not very convenient for young children to bring their food packs. The school could not arrange facilities for lunch, so parents did not prepare lunches for their children to bring to school*
>
> IDI, a father of a 3-year-old child, not in school, Tan Trinh, Ha Giang

Lack of standardized material infrastructure at the main schools and school branches

In general, at the main schools, the material infrastructure (including childcare and education rooms, playgrounds, equipment, toys, electricity, water and waste systems) has basically ensured the early childhood care and education (ECCE) process. 3/6 main schools in Ha Giang (Sao Mai preschool, communal preschool in Tan Trinh and Tan Bac) and in Lai Chau, 2/3 of the main schools (in Then Sin and Ban Bo) have met the national standard requirements. However, in-school branches, there are severely insufficient facilities. Through interviews with representatives of ECE institutions, some limitations in facilities at the main schools and school branches that may affect the decision to send children to preschool were explored as follows:

In Ha Giang, all the children's toilets in the main schools do not meet sanitation standards. There are outdoor playgrounds, but there are not enough toys in some main schools, such as Xuan Minh, Sao Mai, and Tien Nguyen preschools.

Table 6: Material infrastructure in the main schools and school branches in six project communes in Ha Giang

School	School branch	Borrowed classrooms	No latrine	Outdoor playground		No electricity/ water
				None	Not enough[13]	
Sao Mai Preschool	Main Preschool				x	
	Na Rai	x			x	
	Tan Binh	x			x	
	Tan An	x			x	
	Tan Tien				x	
Tan Bac Preschool	Main Preschool				x	
	My Bac			x		Use water from nearby households
	Nam Kham		x	x		Use water from nearby households
	Na Tho		x	x		Use water from nearby households; electricity: needs repairing
Tan Trinh Preschool	Main Preschool					
	Mac Thuong			x		
	Mac Ha			x		
	Tan Trang			x		
	Ngoi Han			x		

[13] There is no playground and/or there are not enough at least 5 types of outdoor toys for children as prescribed in Circular No. 32/2012/TT-BGDDT dated 14 September 2012 of the Minister of Education and Training, including: seesaw, animal rides, swing, slide, merry-go-rounds (for nurseries) and additional balance bridge, ladder - slide, ball-play-equipment (for kindergartens)

Table 6: Material infrastructure in the main schools and school branches in six project communes in Ha Giang

School	School branch	Borrowed classrooms	No latrine	Outdoor playground		No electricity/ water
				None	Not enough[13]	
Tien Nguyen Preschool	Main Preschool				x	
	Xuan Hong	x	x	x		No electricity
	Xuan Hoa			x		No electricity
	Tay Son		x	x		No electricity
	Cao Son		x	x		No electricity
	Nam Cai	x	x	x		No electricity
	Trung Thanh		x	x		No electricity
	Hong Son		x	x		No electricity
	Quang Son	x	x	x		No electricity
	Thuong Binh	x	x	x		No electricity
	Ha Binh		x	x		No electricity
	Thuong Minh					No electricity
	Xuan Chieu	x	x	x		No electricity
Xuan Minh	Main Preschool				x	
	Phin Trai				x	
	Bac Peng				x	
	Lang Cang				x	
	Lung Ly				x	
Yen Thanh	Main Preschool					
	Dong Tam	x	x	x		Use water from nearby households
	Yen Thanh	x		x		Use water from nearby households
	Thuong Binh	In construction and renovation (intended to combine two branches)		x		Use water from nearby households
	Tan Thuong			x		Use water from nearby households

Source: Statistics data and in-depth interviews with childcare institutions in six communes.

Ten school branches still have to borrow classrooms. Tien Nguyen school branches borrow villages' headquarters/offices to use as their classrooms. Sao Mai preschool branches use classrooms of the primary school. The classroom area is not guaranteed as required. Many schools branches and classrooms are semi-permanent, neglected and damaged. Since they borrow classrooms, preschool children could be forced to take a school day off when such places are requisitioned for other village activities.

School branches often have no outdoor toys (or lack of outdoor toys). Outdoor playgrounds cannot guarantee safety for children since there are no fences, untiled floors, no landscape, and no green environment for children to play and experience.

There is still a lack of classroom supplies and toys in-school branches. Most teaching aids and equipment are not enough as regulated by Circular No. 02/2010/TT-BGD promulgating the minimum teaching aids, toys and supplies/equipment for ECE.

Twelve school branches have no toilets for children, especially the school branches in Tien Nguyen, Yen Thanh, and Tan Bac. Most school branches do not meet regulations on toilet area and equipment/ supplies.

Regarding technical infrastructure, the school branches of Tien Nguyen preschool do not have electricity, and teachers are facing difficulties in childcare and education. For example, children's hygienic activity in the winter requires warm water, and teachers have to boil water using a firewood stove.

> *The material infrastructure was built long ago, so it is not in good condition and is not maintained annually. At the beginning of the school year, a survey and inspection of the material infrastructure of ECE school branches were conducted. Lack of tools, children's toys, broken windows..."*
>
> IDI, leader of Yen Binh town, Ha Giang

Branch of Nam Cai Preschool, Tien Nguyen, Ha Giang

Branch of Thuong Binh Preschool, Tien Nguyen, Ha Giang

Branch of My Bac Preschool, Tan Bac, Ha Giang

Branch of Dong Tam Preschool, Yen Thanh, Ha Giang

> *The main school meets the standard level 1; everything is sufficient and good for children. At the school branches, there are enough classes or children; they do not have to join multi-age classes. However, at break time and during outdoor activities, there are no toys for children, so parents do not want to send their children to school*
>
> IDI, a father of a 3-year-old child, not in school, Tan Trinh, Ha Giang

In Lai Chau, compared to Ha Giang, the facilities at the main schools and school branches are significantly better. There is no situation of borrowed classrooms or no toilets for children. All of these were possible thanks to the NTP-NRD in the province. However, the existing toilets do not completely meet all area and toilet equipment/facility standards. For example, the toilet areas are narrow and tight; there is only one latrine with one toilet trough and one pit toilet for 40 students at Na Don school branch, Binh Lu, Lai Chau.

Table 7: Material infrastructure at main schools and branches in 3 project communes in Lai Chau

School	School branch/ school	Borrowed classrooms	No separate toilets	Outdoor play ground		No electricity/ water
				None	Not sufficient	
Ban Bo Preschool	Main Preschool					
	Trung Tam					
	Hop Nhat				x	
	Na Khuy				x	
	Phieng Pang					
	Phieng Tien				x	
	Na Can	x			x	
	Na Khuong				x	
	Phieng Hoi				x	
	Na Ut				x	
	Nam Tang				x	
	Coc Phung				x	
	Co Lot				x	
Then Sin Preschool	Main Preschool					
	Sin Cau					
	Pan Kheo					
	Then Sin					
	Na Dong					
	Dong Phong					
Binh Lu Preschool	Main Preschool				x	The school does not have a clean water supply system.
	Na Don				x	
	PaPe					
	Na San				x	
	Na Hum				x	
	Na Phat					

Source: Statistics data and in-depth interviews with childcare institutions in three commune

The most noticeable problems in terms of material infrastructure at school branches in Lai Chau are lack of outdoor playgrounds or degraded playgrounds and lack of safety conditions, e.g. surrounded by fences and outdoor toys.

Ban Bo school branch, Lai Chau

Then Sin school branch, Lai Chau

1.2.2.2 Service quality

Care and education activities at preschools (including main schools and school branches) are implemented according to the ECE program promulgated by the Ministry of Education and Training.

In terms of educational activities, the ECE program has been flexibly applied and adjusted to suit the regional conditions, focusing on bringing regional characteristics, festivals and popular customs of ethnic groups into the curriculum for children's experience. In addition, the preschools also implement thematic activities of "developing a child-centered preschool" and the project "Strengthening the Vietnamese language for preschool children and primary school pupils in ethnic minority areas."

> *Depending on each school branch – with children from different ethnic groups, the school organizes diverse activities suitable to the traditional culture of ethnic minorities. For example, the school organises experimental activities introducing Then folk songs of the Tay ethnic group, or brocade weaving of the Pa Then ethnic group - typical for Tan Trinh commune. Interaction activities with artist is also organised. Besides, schools regularly introduce experimental and life skill developing activities.*
>
> *The school can apply models to improve the quality of childcare and education such as: the model of "children's library" to help enhance children's Vietnamese language skills at the main school or "friendly classrooms" for teachers to visit, exchange and discuss at school branches. Each classroom has a library corner for children to get acquainted to books and this contributes to the development of Vietnamese language of children.*
>
> IDI, representative of the preschool, Tan Trinh, Ha Giang

Educational activity in Then Sin school branch, Lai Chau

A common difficulty in ethnic minority ECE institutions is language development for children because children communicate with their parents mainly in their ethnic language. They are not yet used to communicating with teachers in Kinh (Vietnamese) language. Being aware of this issue, ECE institutions have introduced activities to improve teacher quality and support teachers in communicating with children when they first start schooling.

> *Annually, the preschool cares about the teachers' quality. For four school branches, the school divides them into clusters and develops sample classes, sample periods, thematic seminars, and professional activities so that teachers can come up with the most appropriate educational methods and content in each school branch. Most of the school's teachers are from Tay and Kinh ethnic groups; therefore, in school/ school branches where there are many children of other ethnic groups, e.g., Dao and Mong, teachers also face many difficulties communicating with children. The teachers cooperate with the parent associations to assist (teachers) in interpreting to support communication between teachers and children from the start of their schooling until the time the children get used to school and friends, then parents gradually leave.*
>
> IDI, representative of kindergarten, Tan Trinh, Ha Giang

Difficulties in terms of lacking teaching aids, equipment, and toys for children, have also been improved by the schools via their efforts to mobilize teachers to participate in making tools/equipment and toys based on the actual needs of the schools.

Learning tools collected by teachers – Sin Cau school branch, Then Sin, Lai Chau

Regarding care and mealtime activities, depending on the conditions of each preschool/school branch, meals could be provided to ensure nutrition, hygiene and safety.

As a result, in general, the expected results at the end of each age group have all been achieved. The parents interviewed also recognized their children's progress thinking and language development when they went to school. However, in most schools, the goals related to language development and physical development for nursery-age children are lower than other goals. Stunting still exists.

> *The teachers are enthusiastic; they all carry the children with them for a while before placing the children into their seats. There are certain differences in the children's cognition. In the first week of school, my child started to sing and learnt to feed herself, could recognize shapes and colors*
>
> IDI, parent of nursery child in school, Then Sin

1.2.2.3 Accessibility

Accessibility was assessed using three criteria. First, the entrance age of children to preschools/school branches. Second, time to pick up and drop off children, and third, the distance from the households to the schools/school branches and the convenience of transportation.

ECE institutions accept children of different ages depending on their material infrastructure and teacher resources regarding the entrance age. In Ha Giang, children are admitted to preschools at the age of 12 - 72 months and are divided into groups of classes: 12 – 24 months old, 24 – 36 months old, 3 - 4 years old, 4-5 years old, 5-6 years old. In main schools, children can be sent to preschool from the age of 12 months; in-school branches, parents usually send children aged 18 months or older to school branches. In Lai Chau, preschools accept children aged 24 months and older. With such above regulation on the entrance age, it can be seen that children under 24 months old in Lai Chau have no opportunity to access childcare institutions. Children under 18 months old in Xuan Minh, Tan Bac, have no chance to access childcare facilities. In Ha Giang, children in villages far from the main schools will have limited opportunities to access ECE institutions. Such institutions usually only admit children aged 18 or 24 months old due to limited material infrastructure conditions and teacher resources (as analyzed above). Meanwhile, the interviews with representatives of ECE institutions and local authorities show that there are parents who have the demand for and desire to send their children to preschool early, especially those who work at companies and factories and those who do trading or provide services for example in some villages of Hung Phong, Na Ut, Nam Phat in Ban Bo commune and some villages of Then Sin commune.

Table 8: Minimum entrance age of children to schools/school branches

	Ha Giang						Lai Chau		
	Yen Binh town	Tan Trinh	Xuan Minh	Tan Bac	Tien Nguyen	Yen Thanh	Then Sin	Ban Bo	Binh Lu
12m ++	Main school	Main school			Main school	x			
18m ++	Main school		x	x					
24m ++		Main school			Main school		x	x	x

Source: Statistics data and in-depth interviews with childcare institutions in 6 communes.

Regarding daily care time, in schools/school branches that offer semi-boarding meals, the care time is from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. In schools that have not yet offered semi-boarding meals, care time is from 7:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. (a.m.) and from 1:30 to 2:30 (p.m.). Children do not go to preschool on Saturdays and Sundays. With this time frame, some households have difficulty in arranging time to pick up and drop off children, especially when there are no semi-boarding services, parents have to spend time picking up their children at noon or have to leave work early to pick up their children or to look after their children on weekends.

Regarding the distance from home to school, the farthest distance recorded for a distance from a household to the nearest school/school branch was about 10 km. The survey results on the distance from children's houses in preschools to preschools show that the average distance ranges from 0.7 km to 1.9 km. The data shows that compared to the farthest distance, the average distance from houses of the children in preschools is less than one-fifth. This suggests that distance may be a barrier for some households living far from the schools/school branches.

Table 9: Distance to school, according to information provided by households having children attending main preschools and school branches

Province	Commune	Average distance (km)	N
Lai Chau	Ban Bo	0.7	66
	Binh Lu	1	48
	Then Sin	1	49
Ha Giang	Xuan Minh	1.1	26
	Tan Bac	1.4	40
	Yen Binh Town	1.4	72
	Tien Nguyen	**1.5**	**44**
	Yen Thanh	1.7	63
	Tan Trinh	**1.9**	**61**
	Chung	1.3	469

Source: Survey data, 2021

Regarding the convenience of the road, in addition to the separation caused by the river in Tien Nguyen (Ha Giang) as described above, the mountainous terrain and many rocky roads make traveling difficult, which not only takes lots of time for parents to take their children to/from school, but also affects the safety of children.

Road to school in Tien Nguyen, Ha Giang

Road to school in Then Sin, Lai Chau

1.2.3 Community factor

Some important issues related to community factors that can be barriers to children's schooling are living practices, methods of household economic development and gender role stereotypes in childcare, etc.

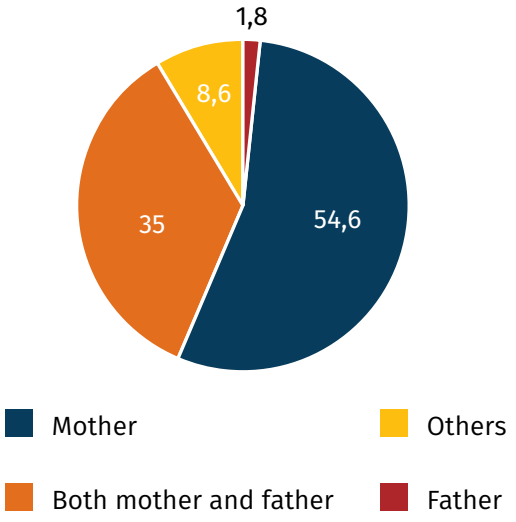
Regarding the living practices and product development methods of households in the project area, agroforestry production plays a vital role in all areas. People have a habit of working in the fields/hills early (around 6 a.m.), while receiving children at preschools is usually from 7 a.m. onwards. The distance from the houses to the fields/hills is often quite far, so they (usually the mothers) have the habit of bringing the children to the fields/hills so that they can both work and look after the children.

In each area, specific ethnic groups are residing. For example, the Thai people live mostly in the three communes of Tam Duong district, Lai Chau province, while the Dao, Tay, Pa Then, and Mong people are common in six communes in Quang Binh district, Ha Giang province. Due to the specific characteristics of topography and living practices, many ethnic minority households live in villages on the high mountains (such as the Dao, Mong, Pa Then, etc.) therefore, they face more limits in sending their children to school.

In some other households, because the parents migrate to work far away (outside the province) or go abroad to work, their children are left home and taken care of by grandparents. Difficulties and inconveniences of transport may cause grandparents to leave their grandchildren at home instead of taking them to school.

Regarding gender stereotypes in childcare roles, it can be affirmed that women are playing an important role in childcare when 89.6% of household representatives said that mothers were in charge of taking care of children when they are not in school, of which 35% said that the mothers were mainly in charge, and 54.6% said that both mothers and fathers were responsible. The responsibility for childcare contributes to the time that women do housework and unpaid care work, making it about 1.5 times longer than the time on same tasks of men. According to the survey data, the average duration on doing unpaid housework and care work per day of women is 4.82 hours, while that of men is 3.13 hours.

Chart 4: Persons in charge of childcare when a child is not attending preschool



Source: Survey data, 2021

In rural ethnic minority areas, we can easily see the image of a woman carrying a child while doing household chores as well as cultivation.

Women doing childcare in Ban Bo, Lai Chau

The existence of gender stereotypes that attach the responsibility of childcare to women in the context where childcare services in the locality have certain limitations has made women have less time on household economic development. Meanwhile, the right to share and perform household chores between husband and wife is now regulated and protected by laws. Article 19, Law on Marriage and Family 2014 stipulates that the husband and wife's responsibility is to jointly share and perform household chores. The National Strategy on Gender Equality for the 2021-2030 period (issued together with the Government's Resolution No. 28/NQ-CP of March 3, 2021) sets the target: Reduce the average number of hours doing housework and unpaid domestic care for women to 1.7 times in 2025 and 1.4 times in 2030 compared to men.

Woman carrying a child while doing household chores in Then Sin, Lai Chau

1.2.4 Policy factor

Currently, kindergarten children in ethnic minority areas benefit from many policies of the Government of Vietnam on tuition fee exemption and reduction, on support in learning expenses, etc.

Regarding the policy on tuition fee exemption and reduction, kindergarten EM children in areas with challenging socio-economic conditions are entitled to a 70% reduction in tuition fees. In addition, children in 5-year-old kindergarten classes in areas with challenging socio-economic conditions, extremely difficult communes in coastal areas and islands are entitled to a tuition fee exemption.[14]

Regarding the policy on learning expenses support, 3-5-year-old kindergarten children of ECE institutions in border communes, high mountains, islands and communes with extremely difficult socio-economic conditions are supported with the amount equivalent to 10% of the base salary amount per child per month (9 months in a schoolyear), equivalent to VND 149,000/month to maintain school lunches.[15]

In Quang Binh district, Ha Giang province, in the period 2021-2025, 3/6 communes in the project area have extremely difficult socio-economic conditions,[16] namely Yen Thanh, Tien Nguyen, Xuan Minh. Besides, Yen Binh town is on the list of communes still facing difficulties. The other two communes, i.e. Tan Bac and Tan Trinh, are not still facing difficulties, and there are still extremely difficult villages[17] in these communes.

In Tam Duong district, Lai Chau province, in the period 2021-2025, there is one out of three communes in the project area having extremely difficult socio-economic conditions, namely Then Sin (III). The other two communes, Ban Bo and Binh Lu have met the new rural development standards; therefore, in the coming period, they are no longer on the list of communes with extremely difficult socio-economic conditions.

In addition to the Government's policy, Lai Chau has a policy on lunch support for younger children of 24-36 months old who are attending public preschools in the province, permanently residing in extremely difficult villages, or members of poor or near-poor households following the Prime Minister's regulations, or who belong to 16 ethnic minority groups having tiny population with the support level equal to 10% of the base salary amount per child per month, equivalent to VND149,000/month, starting from the schoolyear 2020 - 2021. [18]

> *Những năm trước khi chưa có các chế độ hỗ trợ cho trẻ mẫu giáo tỉ lệ trẻ đến trường ít, tuy nhiên khi có chế độ thì phụ huynh đã đưa con đến trường nhiều hơn*
>
> PVS đại diện trường mầm non, Tân Trịnh, Hà Giang

[14] Decree No. 86/2015/ND-CP dated 2 October 2015 of the Government and Decree No. 145/2018/ND-CP dated 16 October 2018 of the Government stipulating the amendment and supplements to some articles of the Decree No. 86/2015/ND-CP

[15] Decree No. 06/2018/ND-CP dated 9 May 2018 of the government stipulating the lunch support policy for kindergarten children and the policy on benefits for preschool teachers.

[16] Criteria for identifying zone III communes (communes with extreme difficulties) are stipulated in Decision No. 33/2020/QD-TTg on criteria for identifying ethnic minority and mountainous areas based on their levels of development in the period 2021–2025.

[17] The criteria for determining extremely difficult villages are based on the percentage of ethnic minority households out of the total number of households, and the percentage of poor households and the road system/national electricity grid system according to Decision No. 33/2020/QD-TTg on criteria for identifying ethnic minority and mountainous areas based on their levels of development in the period 2021–2025.

[18] Resolution No. 11/2020/NQ - HDND dated 10 July 2020 stipulating the level of lunch support for children aged from 24 months to under 36 months in Lai Chau province.

According to the evaluation of representatives of childcare institutions, the introduction and implementation of these policies have created opportunities to motivate parents to send their children to school.

To further clarify the impacts of these policies, the average cost of childcare and education in 1 month was calculated by the group of beneficiaries. The information obtained shows an obvious difference in the expenses on ECE among different groups.

- The average ECE cost per month per child is VND 660,000/month.
- Poor households bear lower average costs than the near-poor and the better-off groups (VND 456,800/month, VND 651,700/month, VND 713,500/month, respectively).
- The payment amount of households receiving both tuition fee and lunch support is significantly lower than the average cost, and the payment amount of households receiving either tuition fee support or lunch support, especially when compared to the households not receiving any support at all (see Table 10)

Table 10: Monthly average cost of childcare service, by a group of support from the Government (Unit: VND)

Average	No support at all	Lunch and tuition fee support	Lunch support	Tuition fee support
660.000	718.000	411.600	555.000	639.000

Source: Survey data, 2021

Thus, the positive impacts of the policy have been recognized. However, there is a problem raised by communal authorities in Lai Chau, i.e. the risk that some households may no longer benefit from this policy. In 2021, Ban Bo and Then Sin met standards for new rural development communes, and no longer belonged to the list of communes with extremely difficult socio-economic conditions, so they are no longer entitled to the policy on tuition fee exemption and reduction and support in learning expenses for kindergarten children. Meanwhile, there are still some villages in the commune that are still facing extreme difficulties. Without ongoing benefits from the policies on tuition exemption and reduction and lunch support, some households may have financial difficulties in sending their children to school. Given this, the communal government has submitted a document to the district to ask for comments/decisions on recognizing some villages as extremely difficult villages so that households in these villages can continue benefitting from such policies. At the same time, the government has also implemented timely solutions so that children's school attendance is not interrupted (as presented below). However, these are short-term solutions, and it requires longer-term interventions.

Before, this commune was an extremely difficult commune. If the commune is recognized as a new rural development commune, it will no longer be entitled to the benefits of the policies applicable to extremely difficult communes. Some children will not benefit from Government policies, and socialization will be applied; families will have to pay tuition fees. While some villages and some households are still poor and may face difficulties in paying for school meals and tuition fees. The temporary solution of the commune is to mobilize political organizations and business households with good economic conditions to support to form the Fund for "Supporting children to school." After mobilizing this fund, the commune will hand it over to the preschool to balance support for the children. Currently, the meal cost of a child a day is calculated to be VND9,000/ day, mostly spent on lunches. The preschool will monthly report on how the fund is used by the government and the donors publicly and transparently. The fund will be spent to support households under difficult circumstances. If covering both tuition fees and meal support, the support amount is around VND12,000/day. However, the sustainability of the fund is not guaranteed because the support/donation depends on the households. The total funds mobilized is currently VND7 million. Preliminary statistics show that a few dozen children need to be supported and live scattered in different areas, mostly children of the poor and near-poor households. The commune is waiting for a new guiding document from the province, then will implement that socialization activity to maintain the number of children attending preschools.

IDI, leader of Ban Bo, Lai Chau

Although the commune has met new rural development criteria, the highland villages face many difficulties, and the Government support has only partially ensured the diet for children. The commune mobilizes part of the state-supported budget and mobilizes parents to contribute more. In a month, the cost to be paid is about over VND100,000, but still, many parents do not have money to contribute monthly, especially in the two communes that are not entitled to support the regime. For example, when the children do not receive meal support, many parents prepare meals for their children to bring to school. However, there are children having only boiled rice, without any or very few other foods, then teachers have to give them more food, etc. The commune mobilizes parents to pay more for children's school meal expenses to ensure they have enough food; many parents don't have money to pay, they don't let their children have lunch at school.

IDI, leader of Then Sin, Lai Chau

Another policy issue needing attention is that currently, the Government has only offered benefits support policies for the kindergarten group, but not for the nursery group. Meanwhile, the percentage of kindergarten enrolment rate is already quite high. In the coming time, it is necessary to pay attention to the enrolment of nursery children to reduce the care burden in households. The absence of a support policy for this group of children may somewhat limit the ability of parents to send their children to nurseries. Currently, parents are still responsible for paying for children's meals under 36 months old. Some households in difficult economic conditions are being supported via socialization programs such as parents contributing/preparing lunches for children (for example, the program for food contribution by parents in Then Sin, Lai Chau).

Parents contribute food for their children's lunch in Then Sin, Lai Chau

1.3. Necessity and demand for childcare type

1.3.1 The necessity of promoting children attending preschool to contribute to reduced care time of women in rural ethnic minority areas

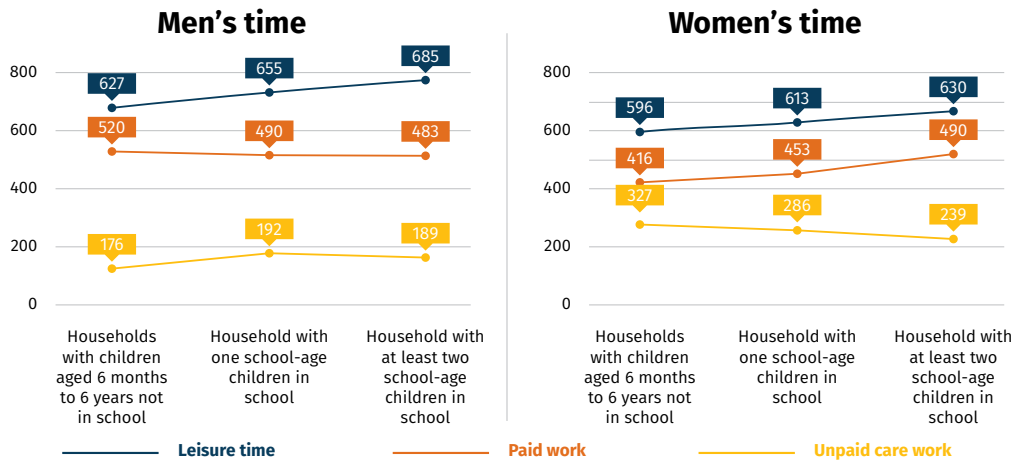
The question is: "does sending children to preschool reduce women's time doing housework?" Correlation data between the number of children aged six months to 6 years who are in preschool in the households and the time spent doing housework, income-generating work and leisure time of women show an inverse proportion between children's preschool attendance and the time doing housework; and the direct proportion between children's preschool attendance and the time doing income-generating work.

In households with children aged 6 months to 6 years who are not in school, on average, women spend 327 minutes a day on household chores (including housework, care of children/elderly, etc.). Meanwhile, in families with children of this age who are in school, the average time per day women spend on household chores reduces to 286 minutes (41 minutes less). This duration further decreases to 239 minutes in a family with two school-age children in school. In contrast, the time spent on income-generating work increases from 596 minutes (households having children aged 6 months to 6 years who are not in school) to 630 minutes (households having two school-age children who are in school).

Similarly, when considering the correlation between children's preschool attendance and men's time, it is noteworthy that the average time men spend on household chores tends to increase slightly, i.e. from 176 minutes to 192 minutes. Is it the situation that when children attend preschool, men spend more time taking them to/from school, leading to the increase in their time on household chores? Initial survey data tends to support this hypothesis. The average time spent on childcare (including taking the children to/from preschool and teaching children) per day of men in the group of men having school-age children who are not in preschool is 37.8 minutes. This time increases to 52 minutes in the group of men having school-age children who are in school. Research results suggest that sending children to preschool will also promote men's further engagement in care work in the family.

Thus, it is reasonable to assume that sending children to preschool would reduce women's time spent on unpaid care work, creating favorable conditions in terms of time for them to participate in economic activities and improve their values. And therefore, it is necessary to propose appropriate solutions to promote children's preschool attendance.

Chart 5: Time women and men spend on housework chores, income-generating activities and rest time by a group of respondents having children in preschool



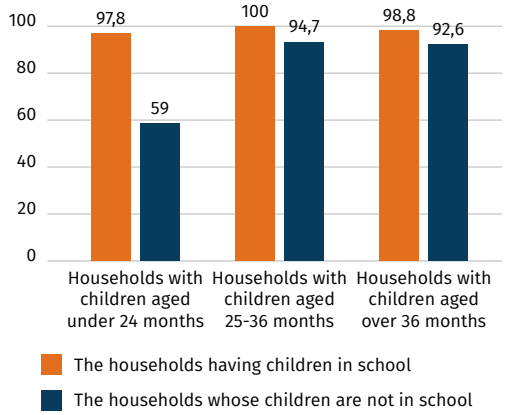
Source: Survey data, 2021

1.3.2 Households' demand for sending children to preschools

In exploring the demand for sending children to preschool in the next school year, the obtained data shows that, among the household groups having children in school, the percentage of households saying that they would continue sending their children to preschool in the next school year is very high, i.e. 98% or higher. Among households whose children are not in school, the percentage of households having demand for sending children to preschool in the next school year is higher in households having children aged over 24 months, namely 94.7% in households with children aged 25-36 months, and 92.6% in households with children aged over 36 months, and 59% in households with children aged under 24 months. The data show a correlation between the viewpoints on the age of a child and the demand for sending children to preschool. Thus, in order to promote the preschool attendance rate of the nursery child group, it is necessary to focus on communication to change parents' awareness of the age to send children to school.

Even though the percentage of parents of children under 24 months old having demand for sending their children to preschool is not as high as that percentage of parents of older children, this still reflects the need for sending children to preschool of a proportion of parents. This should be taken into consideration in the development of proposals for the appropriate types of childcare in the provinces.

Chart 6: Percentage of households having demand for sending children to preschool in 2022, by children's current preschool attendance status (%)



Source: Survey data, 2021

Demand for the types of childcare institutions

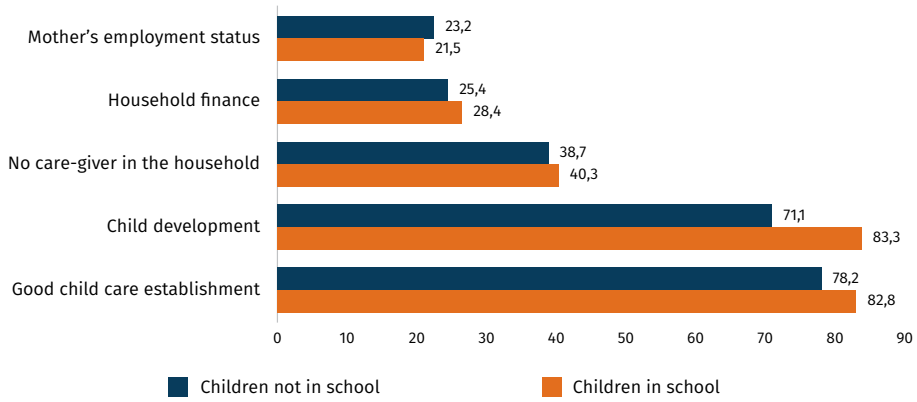
On exploring the demand for childcare institutions, the obtained data show that none would like to send their children to private childcare groups/ centers. The vast majority of households chose a public childcare institution (96.5%), in which the majority of households expressed their wish to send their children to the main schools (58.2%). Notably, when learning about their demand by child age group, the percentage of households with children aged 24 months or younger accounted for the highest rate, i.e. 62.8%. This parents' choice shows a tendency to choose an institution with better material infrastructure and better class quality (as shared by a parent as below).

> *My child is still too young, only go to preschool after 24 months, as my child is 18 months old, she is still too young, she will cry a lot at. Will choose the main preschool because the material infrastructure of the school branches is not as good as those in the main school; multi-age class is not suitable. Children should have peers of the same age to grow faster get more care from nurses/teachers. Although the school branch is closer [to my house], i.e. over 50m, while the distance to the main preschool is 3 km*
>
> Parent with children not in school, Yen Binh town, Ha Giang

Determinants and concerns of households when sending children to preschool

Data on the determinants of households' sending children to preschool also show that having a good childcare and education institution and the child's development are the two most important factors determining whether or not a family sends a child to preschool (over 80% of households chose these two factors). Finance also received the attention of about one-third of the surveyed households. There is a big difference in the "viewpoint of the child's development" determinant that affect households' decision. The percentage of households having children in preschool who chose this determinant is 83.3%, while households with children not in preschool are 71.1%. This indicates that activities to *support the improvement of childcare institutions in both quality and material infrastructure and communication activities to help households understand the benefits of preschool attendance to the child's development will promote* the households' decision on sending children to preschool.

Chart 7: Determining factors of households' sending children to preschool, by preschool attendance status of the children (%)



Source: Survey data, 2021

To learn more about the factors parents care about when sending their children to preschool, the obtained data show that, in general, parents, both in the group having children in preschool and the group not, expressed concern about many factors. That said, in order to promote children's preschool attendance, it is necessary to pay attention to the quality of education, material infrastructure, and regular start and dismissal time of preschool. Notably, the top three factors of concern among families having children not in preschool are regular start and dismissal time of preschool, childcare expenses, and child safety at preschool.

Table 11: What parents care about when sending children to preschools (%)

	Group – children attending school	Group – children not attending school	Average
Teachers' attitude and conduct towards children (closeness, friendliness, dedication)	96.2	87.1	93.8
Regular start and dismissal time of preschool	94.5	91.4	93.7
Assuring child safety at preschool	95.1	89.0	93.5
Nutritional care (food portion, nutrition regime, number of meals)	94.9	89.0	93.4
Tuition fee and other contributions	94.5	89.6	93.2
Educational activities and games for children	94.5	87.1	92.6
Teaching aids and equipment	92.8	85.9	91.0
Preschool-parents communication on the child	92.8	85.9	91.0
Classroom (area, sanitation, safety, etc.)	91.7	86.5	90.3
Playground area (area, green trees, toys, level of safety, hygiene/sanitation, ..)	92.8	85.3	90.8
Toilet area (area, equipment, level of hygiene/ sanitation, safety)	91.0	86.5	89.9
Teachers' ability to use Vietnamese and ethnic languages	88.7	81.6	86.9
Distance from house to preschool/school branch	85.1	79.8	83.7

Source: Survey data, 2021

1.4. Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

In ethnic minority areas in the project location, public preschool is the only and most common type of childcare. In the township area, there used to be private childcare centers/groups in operation but due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were temporarily closed. The current situation shows that local people do not have many choices in the types of ECE service. To meet the ECE demand of households, given topographical characteristics of mountainous areas, the public preschool system was developed using the model of: one main preschool located in the commune center and the school branches located in the villages. As a result, it is more convenient for households to send their children to preschool.

Statistics show that the percentage of kindergarten children aged 36 months or older who are in preschool has reached almost 100%. This is thanks to the efforts in the effective implementation of policies on ECE universalization as well as policies prioritizing investment in ECE development in ethnic minority and mountainous areas. In addition, there is also creativity of local government and educational institutions in carrying out the socialization of education, mobilization of social resources so that families with difficult economic conditions can have an opportunity to send their children to school. It can be said that existing policies and programs on ECE education have been closing the gap of living standards in accessing ECE services.

The concern at this time is that the attendance rate of the nursery child group (6-36 months old) remains low and there is a significant difference among different areas. Compared to Ha Giang, the preschool attendance rate of this child group is lower in Lai Chau. The explanation could be that preschools in Lai Chau currently only accept children aged 24 months and older, while preschools in Ha Giang accept children from 12 months old. In Ha Giang, the enrolment rates in Tien Nguyen and Yen Thanh are higher than in Tan Bac, Tan Trinh, Yen Binh town and Xuan Minh town. This variation can be attributed to many factors, including the household's awareness of the entrance age preschool. The percentage of households in Tien Nguyen and Xuan Thanh who thought that children should go to preschool between the ages of 6 and 36 months is higher than that in the other 3 communes.

The results of the assessment on the availability, accessibility, and quality of the childcare type available in the area show that there are many factors preventing children's preschool attendance. These factors exist at many levels from household, school, community and society. At the household level, the hesitation in sending children to preschool at younger age (under 36 months) persists in over 40% of households, especially among the group of parents in the middle-aged group (45 years old and older) and the group of parents with a low education level (primary school and lower). At the school level, there are many problems such as lack of school branches, lack of age-appropriate groups, lack of semi-boarding services due to lack of kitchen or inconvenience in transporting lunches/meals from the main schools to the school branches, lack of material infrastructure such as classrooms, kitchens, toilets, outdoor playgrounds, etc. At the community level, the inconvenient road system affects families in taking their children to/from preschools and the delivery of lunch portions from the main preschools to the school branches. At the society level, the lack of a policy on tuition fees and meals support for the nursery child group is one among the significant challenges to the enrolment of children of this age. In addition, the new rural development in some localities such as Ban Bo, Then Sin in Lai Chau, on the one hand, has generated achievements i.e. these communes are no longer in the list of particularly difficult communes, but would also pose challenges to some households in difficult economic conditions when they no longer have the opportunity to receive policies on child tuition fee and meals support applicable to extremely difficult areas. The above barriers are affecting the children's preschool attendance differently in each locality depending on the socio-economic characteristics in each area. Typically, the lack of

school branches, lack of semi-boarding services, and difficulties in material infrastructure are common in childcare institutions in Ha Giang while Lai Chau suffers more limits in providing services for under-24-month-old children. Lack of financial resources and human resources - teachers is being the difficulty that childcare institutions are facing. This significantly affects the school-level barriers set forth above.

The necessity of promoting children's preschool attendance in order to help reduce women's care work time in rural ethnic minority areas has been recognized because a number of existing gender issues regarding the access and development of childcare services were identified. First of all, it is women who are taking the responsibility of the primary caregiver when children have not had access to childcare services. Second, survey data provide evidence that the development of childcare services can reduce women's time on unpaid care work and increase their time spent on income-generating work. In addition, attracting more children to preschool also sets an expectation on limiting the situation of multi-age classes at school branches.

The demand for sending children to preschool was recognized in both groups of households having children in preschool and those not. Although, the percentage of households planning on sending their children to preschool is higher among those with children aged 25 months and older, yet the majority of households with children aged 24 months or younger also reported their demand for sending their children to preschool in the following schoolyear. Two important factors that determine whether a family sends a child to preschool are access to good ECE institutions and the child's development. Therefore, the percentage of households planning to choose a main preschool - with better material infrastructure, semi-boarding services, and age-appropriate classes - is higher than that of households planning to choose a school branch (even though the school branch may be more convenient in terms of distance and travel). Parents cared about many school-related factors, of which the top three are the closeness, friendliness, and dedication of teachers; preschool start and dismissal time; and child safety at preschool. It suggests that emphasis should be placed on the development of quality care services with suitable start and dismissal time (such as full-day care service).

Recommendations

From the analysis of the current situation of childcare types in the project communes and the community's demand for sending children to preschool, the development of plans to promote children's preschool attendance to contribute to reduced care work time of women in rural ethnic minority areas should pay attention to the following issues:

The child tuition fees and lunch support policy play an important role in children's preschool attendance of poor households living in challenging areas. The Vietnamese government's support policy is currently only applicable to the kindergarten child group (36 months and older), leading to a policy gap for the nursery child group (6 - 36 months old). Some provinces (e.g., Lai Chau) have balanced the provincial budget to have preferential policies for the 24-36-month-old child group. However, it is of great necessity to promulgate a nationwide policy for the nursery child group to mobilize them to go to preschool and reduce the care work burden for families, especially women.

Having a sufficient teacher pool plays a crucial role in the mobilization of children to preschool. Policies on planning and developing teachers need to be suitable to rural ethnic minority areas. The number of teachers allowed is not determined by the school branch but by the number of students, making teacher shortages common in Quang Binh (Ha Giang) and Tam Duong (Lai Chau).

The proposed options should target the group of children aged 18-36 months or younger because children aged over 36 months have been mobilized to class (except for those who cannot attend class due to force majeure, e.g., disability). Nationwide policy for ages 6-72 months. However, due to the limited material infrastructure at the schools/preschools and the limited resources of teachers, some branches in Ha Giang and all preschools in Lai Chau only enroll children from 24 months old. Based on the assessment of the responsiveness of existing facilities and human resources along with possible supports from the project, we propose to extend the enrollment age to from 18 months and mobilize maximize the number of children aged 24-36 months who have not yet attended preschool. Lack of standardized material infrastructure, semi-boarding services, age-appropriate groups/classes for children in most of schools and branches do not allow to ensure quality care and education for children under 18 months.

Options to promote children's preschool attendance should be developed based on the local demand, aiming to address barriers related to access to childcare services at all levels. Due to different socio-economic characteristics of other areas and obstacles at different levels in various childcare institutions and areas, the proposed options will be considered and developed to overcome the limits in these areas and proposed to deploy in the appropriate places. It should be noted that besides the solutions to improve preschool material infrastructure, solutions to change the community's awareness of the necessity of sending children to preschool early need to be implemented synchronously.

To ensure feasibility, given that ECE institutions face difficulties and limits in terms of teacher resources, the plans to promote children's preschool attendance need to engage parents and the community. In addition, construction plans need to consider people's affordability to pay and contribute. It should be noted that the overarching challenge for mobilizing nursery child groups to preschool in local areas is that this group of children is not yet entitled to the benefits of policies on tuition fees and meal support as those applicable to the kindergarten children.

On the other hand, some children in the kindergarten age group may no longer receive support policies in the coming period. Therefore, along with the implementation of measures to encourage households to send their children to preschool, it is necessary to at the same time implement measures to support women in developing their household economy. This will help households gain resources to access services and help households see the effective link between sending children to preschool and household economic development.

PART 2: PROPOSED APPROPRIATE PLANS TO PROMOTE CHILDREN'S PRESCHOOL ATTENDANCE, CONTRIBUTING TO REDUCED CARE WORK TIME OF WOMEN IN RURAL ETHNIC MINORITY AREAS

2.1. Rationale

According to the childcare study conducted in project locations, the low percentage of under-36-month-old children in preschool increases the burden of care work on households in the project areas, especially women. In the recent consultation workshop with local authorities and schools in December 2021, participants also confirmed the neccesity of promoting enrolment rate for 18-36 months old in order to develop childhood education and reduce care burden for women.

The low enrolment rate among children of this age group results from many existing barriers.

- Perceptions and norms: the perception that a child should start preschool at the age of 3 or older; gender stereotypes that attach childcare responsibilities to women.
- Preschool capacity and facilities: Lack of school branches in the villages; lack of age-appropriate groups/ classes because of multi-age group/class; lack of semi-boarding services (due to the lack of kitchen or inconvenience of transporting lunches/meals from the main preschools to the school branches); unsecured material infrastructure for example, borrowed classrooms, no private toilets, no outdoor playgrounds/or inadequate playground, no electricity; no enrolment of children under 24 months old; long-distance from home to school; difficult road condition.
- No policies on supporting nursery child group.

Considering resources and funding timeframe, AWEEV will focus on improving preschools' capacity and facilities to provide semi-boarding services and safe environment in their branches. This focus also aligns with parents' top three concerns for sending kids to schools which include regular start and dismissal time of preschools, childcare expenses, and child safety at the schools (see Table 11). Along with this, AWEEV will advocate with district-level Department of Education and Training to support schools which target at expanding classes for children under 36 months in recruiting teachers. Moreover, the first cluster of challenges will be addressed through AWEEV's interventions to change gender norms related to care work, including activities to raise awareness of early childhood education.

As a result of providing the childcare options, AWEEV expects a 10% increase in the enrolment rate in school year 2022-2023, especially for children under 36 months old. An estimated total of 1014 children in 13 target school branches will be impacted thanks to either availibility or improved quality of semi-boarding services, or availablity of classes for U36M child groups (see Table 12). More significantly, 758 among them will benefit from provision of semi-boarding services. Unlike Lai Chau, all target school branches in Ha Giang have not yet provided semi-boarding services, which causes households living faraway from schools to spend extra time, even the whole day, to wait for class dismissal or to do school pickup twice a day. In other words, that 758 children in Ha Giang able to attend schools with semi-boarding services in place can contribute to the decreased childcare workload for parents in terms of reducing waiting and pickup time.

Table 12: Comparison on the enrolment rate in all target school branches

	The number of children having attended school year 2021 - 2022	The number of children attending school year 2022 - 2023	Difference
Total	916	1014	98
Dissaggregated by age groups			
< 18 months	54	84	30
18 - 24 months	118	135	17
24 - 36 months	262	289	27
3 - 5 years old	482	506	24
Dissaggregated by provinces			
Ha Giang (9 branches)	708	758	50
Lai Chau (4 branches)	208	256	48

(Source: Recruitment plans proposed by schools)

2.2. Types of childcare options and selection of target schools

There are three types of options below.

A. Provide materials to repair previously existing kitchens (up to 40m^2); or low-quality classrooms (up to 75m^2); repair toilets (up to 30m^2); or playgrounds

- *Materials to repair previously existing structures, which could include cement, clay bricks and blocks, sand, stones and rock, doors, electric wires, depending on each schools needs.*
- *CARE and schools that adopt this option will sign an MOU which indicates the total amount for purchasing necessary materials to repair the infrastructures. The budget transferred for the schools excludes expenses of hiring workers. While schools are in charge of purchasing materials locally and paying for local people to repair infrastructures, CARE will supervise and check the final work.*

B. Equip schools and/or its branches with cooking utensils and semi-boarding facilities

- *Items for lunches include 370l refrigerator, 8-tray rice cooker/cabinet, using either gas or electricity, water purifier, industrial gas stove (2 cookers), cupboard, W110 x H130 x D400, cooking pots in 3 sizes: 120l – 50l – 30l, pans 50-70cm; and a set of knives, cutting pieces, and baskets.*
- *Items for sleeping include pillows, blankets, and mattresses.*
- *Option B will be executed through CARE's procurement procedures. The equipments will then be delivered to the school boards.*

C. Provide food delivery equipments for main preschools to store and deliver lunches to its branches

- *Items include stainless steel boxes in 2 sizes: 65l and 45l*
- *Option C will be executed through CARE's procurement procedures. The equipments will then be delivered to the school boards.*

In brief, option B is almost for each school branch. Semi-boarding services are still in place in Lai Chau because the center preschools have been delivering lunches to their branches. Solutions for Lai Chau would mainly be Option A, specifically repairing toilets and classrooms to open a new class for children under 24 months old. However, semi-boarding services do not exist in all school branches in Ha Giang due to either lack of kitchens in the branch sites or lack of facilities for lunch delivery from the main schools. Hence, building kitchens and supplying food delivery facilities would be key in Ha Giang.

The school branches mentioned in the table 13 below are proposed by representatives of 9 preschools in Lai Chau and Ha Giang during the consultation workshop last December. Each school prioritizes one or two branches what are most suitable for each option and are potential to increase enrolment rate in coming school years.

Table 13: List of schools and branches to be supported

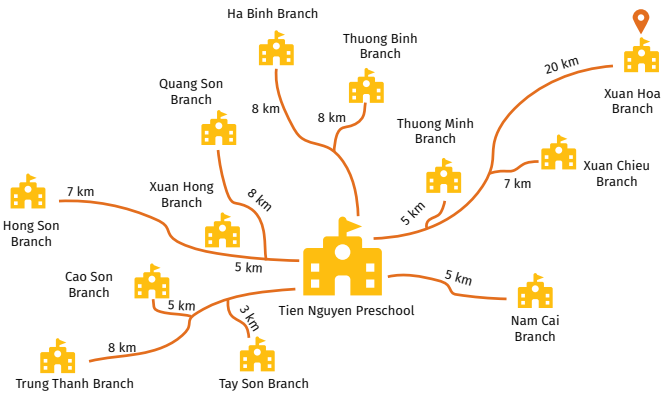
Com-mune	School and its branches to be supported	Option A	Option B	Option C
In Ha Giang				
Tien Nguyen	**Xuan Hoa school branch of Tien Nguyen preschool** - Tien Nguyen preschool has 12 branches. The farthest one – Xuan Hoa branch – locates in a village which there are 104 households of Dao people living without electricty. The branch tentatively recruits 58 children in 2022, keeping the same enrolment rate as the previous year. - There is no semi-boarding service in the Xuan Hoa school branch as of no kitchens; moreover, lunch delivery is unavailable due to very long distance and muddy roads, especially in winters.   *Kitchen space and facilities in Tien Nguyen school*	x (kitchen)	x	
Yen Binh	**Tan Binh school branch of Sao Mai preschool** - Sao Mai preschool has 4 branches. One of them locates in Tan Binh village where 19% of 105 households is in poverty and with diverse ethnic groups including Tay, Nung, and Dao. The branch tentatively recruit 51 children in total in 2022, having 5 kids more than the previous enrolment. - The branch's kitchen has limited capacity to provide quality semi-boarding services due to shortage of cooking and storing food facilities and mattresses for children.	x (kitchen)	x	

Table 13: List of schools and branches to be supported

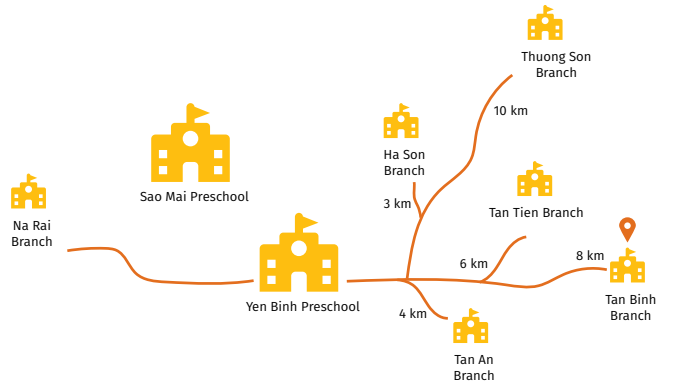
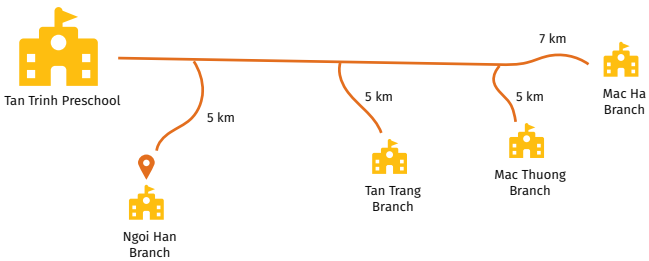
Com-mune	School and its branches to be supported	Option A	Option B	Option C
	   *Kitchen space and facilities in Tan Binh school*			
Tan Trinh	**Ngoi Han school branch of Tan Trinh preschool** - Tan Trinh preschool has 4 branches. One of them locates in Ta Ngao village which is the farthest from the main school and populated by more than four ethnic groups. The school tentatively recruits 80 children in total in 2022, having 11 kids more than the previous enrolment. - There is no semi-boarding in Ngoi Han school due to no kitchens and no lunch delivery as lack of cooking and delivery facilities in the main preschool. However, if lunch delivery facilities and equipments for kids to take naps are provided, Ngoi Han school could run semi-boarding services.   *Classrooms in Ngoi Han school*		X	X

Table 13: List of schools and branches to be supported

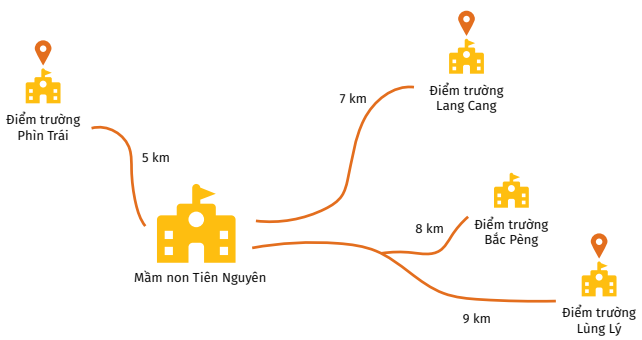
Com-mune	School and its branches to be supported	Option A	Option B	Option C
Xuan Minh	**Lung Ly, Lang Cang, Phin Trai branches of Xuan Minh preschool** - Xuan Minh preschool has 4 branches locating in less populated viallges far from the main school. The number of households living in three mentioned villages is only 184 and their ethnicities are mostly Dao and Pa Then. All three schools tentatively recruit 188 children in all three branches in 2022, having 17 kids more than the previous enrolment. - There is no semi-boarding in all branches due to no kitchens and lack of facilities to provide meals for all branches. Hence, facilities for the main school to cook and deliver food to its branches are the most necessary. Moreover, the main classroom in Lung Ly branch is currently in poor condition for children to study and taking naps, which requires room renovation.   *The classroom in Lung Ly branch school*	x (classroom)	x	

Table 13: List of schools and branches to be supported

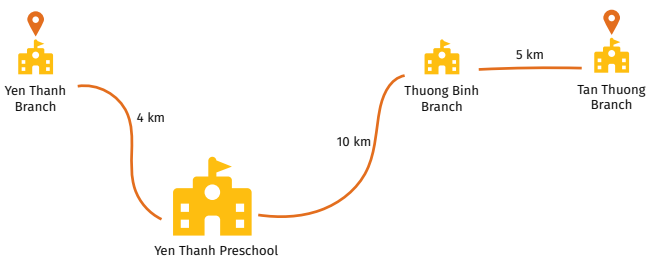
Com-mune	School and its branches to be supported	Option A	Option B	Option C
Yen Thanh	**Tan Thuong and Yen Thanh branches of Yen Thanh main preschool** - Yen Thanh main school has only three branches in villages which have poverty rate of at least 49% and where Dao, H'mong and Pa Then ethnic people live. The branches tentatively recruit 306 children in both branches in 2022, keeping the same enrolment rate as the previous year. - Currently there is no semi-boarding in all branches due to no kitchens and rough roads for food delivery from the main school. However, the school has other secure funding for merging Thuong Binh and Tan Thuong branch into one school where there are new classrooms and a kitchen. Hence, the schools only need cooking utensils and mattresses, blankets for children there. In addition, lunches in Yen Thanh branch will be delivered from the main school if the school is equiped with delivery facilities.   *A teacher on the road to Thuong Binh and Tan Thuong branch*		X	X

Table 13: List of schools and branches to be supported

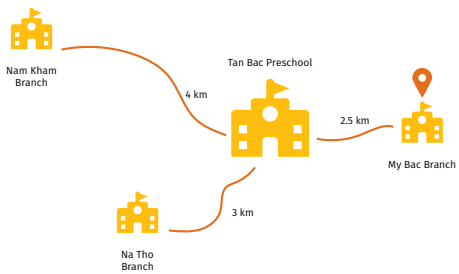
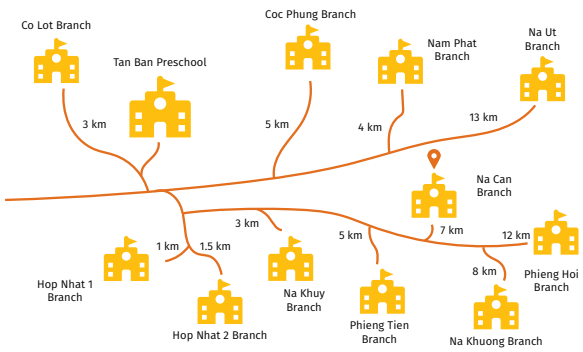
Com-mune	School and its branches to be supported	Option A	Option B	Option C
Tan Bac	**My Bac school branch of Tan Bac preschool** - Tan Bac preschool has 3 branches. One of them locates in My Bac village having 163 Pa Then households. The branch tentatively recruits 85 children in total in 2022, having 18 kids more than the previous enrolment. - Currently, there are no toilets for children and teachers in My Bac branch. Instead, they use to toilets in a nearby community center. Moreover, there is no semi-boarding at the branch due to lack of cooking facilities in the mainschool. 	x (toilets)	x	
In Lai Chau				
Ban Bo	**Na Can branch of Ban Bo preschool** - Ban Bo preschool has 9 branches. One of them – Na Can branch – is at risk of loosing its classrooms. The current classroom in Na Can is part of Na Can primary school, which will soon be withdrawn as the primary school needs extra rooms for new classes. Hence, the school need expand two classrooms which will be built on. The branch tentatively recruits 69 children in total in 2022, keeping the same enrolment rate as the previous year.   *Current state of space which will be reinnovated*	x (toilets, classroom)		

Table 13: List of schools and branches to be supported

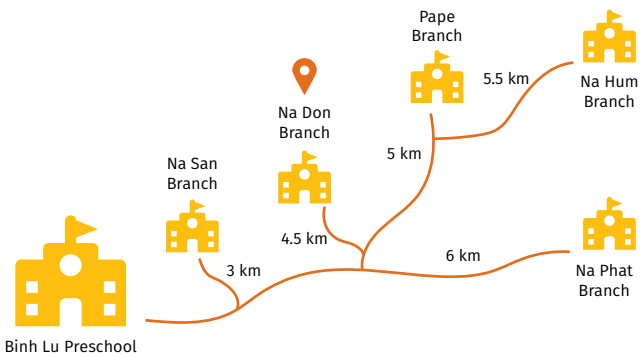
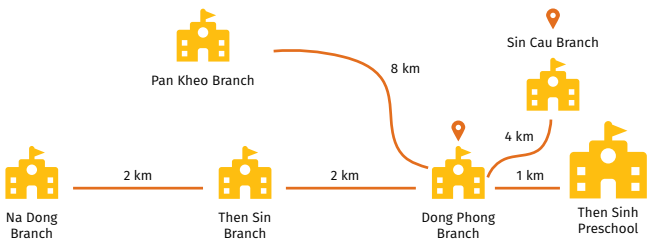
Commune	School and its branches to be supported	Option A	Option B	Option C
Binh Lu	**Na Don branch of Binh Lu preschool** - Na Don is among five branches under management of Binh Lu preschool. It locates in Na Don village where there are 40.6% poverty and 100% Thai ethnic people. The branch tentatively recruits 48 children in total in 2022, having 11 kids more than the previous enrolment. - Curently the branch still can provide semi-boarding services at the school; however, its sanitary space was built several years ago when there were only a few children. The space is now too small for the growing number of school attendees.   *Current state of sanitary space and toilets*	x (toilets)		

Table 13: List of schools and branches to be supported

Commune	School and its branches to be supported	Option A	Option B	Option C
Then Sin	**Sin Cau and Dong Phong branch of Then Sin preschool** - Then Sin preschool has five branches locating in villages of Thai, H'mong ethnic people and more than 40% households still live in poverty. Sin Cau tentatively recruits 43 children in 2022, having 16 kids more than the previous enrolment. Whereas, Dong Phong will recruit 96 children in 2022, having extra 24 kids. - There are semi-boarding services in both Sin Cau and Dong Phong branch as lunch delivery is currently in place from the main school. However, Sin Cau has low-quality toilets and no separate rooms for boys and girls. Moreover, Dong Phong expects to open a new class targeted for children under 24 months, which requires the school to reinnovate a 60m2 room.    *Facilities in kitchens of Sin Cau and Dong Phong branch*	x (toilets, classroom)	x	

2.3. Implementation plan

No.	Activity	Timeframe
1	Seek approval to implement the workplan	Feb - Mar 2022
2	Final agreement on budget and items with schools	Mar 2022
Option A		
3	MOU between CARE and schools signed CARE transfers budget for option A to schools	End of Mar 2022
4	Implementation	Apr – Jul 2022
5	Acceptance of the work	Aug 2022
Option B and C		
6	Procurement process	Mar – Apr 2022
7	Delivery to schools and handover	May 2022
8	Quick assessment on effectiveness of the childcare options	Integrated in project midterm reivew

2.4. Proposed budget plan

CARE International in Vietnam
9th floor, CDC Building,
25 Le Dai Hanh street, Hai Ba Trung district,
www.care.org.vn
info@care.org.vn